



GENDERING ACHIEVEMENT:

***A DISCURSIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION
OF BOYS***

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates accounts of male students' 'under-achievement' generated in the context of hearings within the Australian House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys.

An introductory chapter outlines dominant accounts of the 'crisis' in boys' education, demonstrating that this 'problem' represents a socially and historically situated version of what counts as academic disadvantage. This chapter also introduces the historical analysis of Cohen (1998), whose findings suggest that accounts of boys' failure as the result of educational conditions have deflected attention from the role of masculinity construction in reproducing boys' underperformance. Chapter 2, outlining the discursive approach of this thesis, details the manner in which the present study expands upon Cohen's findings: through analysis attentive to the rhetorical structure and ideological function of contemporary accounts of boys' failure.

Three analytic chapters examine the interpretative repertoires through which witnesses to the Inquiry constructed boys' 'underachievement'. Two of these repertoires involved the representation of male failure as the result of either 'inadequate teachers' or 'inappropriate curriculum'. The analysis focuses upon constructions of boys' inherent 'needs' and 'abilities' that were central to such accounts, illustrating that the depiction of these qualities as 'immutable' positioned the flexibility of teaching practice/curriculum content as the only means of improving boys' attainments. Constructions of teachers and curriculum as 'to blame' for male underperformance are argued to protect the notion of boys' inherent ability, and to depict the provision of conditions necessary for its manifestation as an educational, and moral, requirement.

A third analytic chapter turns attention to constructions of 'the male learner himself' within accounts of boys' achievement decline. It is argued that dichotomous constructions of male and female students worked to naturalize boys' success even when it was not evident, and to pathologize girls' manifest achievement, through the conflation of masculine traits with 'authentic scholarship'. This pattern is argued to produce a dilemma between the maintenance of a masculine identity and successful engagement with school. Ultimately, it is suggested that speakers who simultaneously problematized and valorized hegemonic schoolboy masculinity risked perpetuating the problem they aimed to solve. A concluding chapter addresses the implications of this study for educational policy and practice.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent for this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, to be available for loan and photocopy.

Signed

Date 11/11/06

Katherine Hodgetts

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PREFACE

Over the last decade, the apparent underachievement of boys has been the focus of increasing concern within the Australian education system. Dominant media and scholarly accounts of this issue have painted a bleak picture, presenting boys as lagging behind girls with regard to school retention and literacy, and as over-represented in programs for students with learning difficulties and behaviour problems (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Pervasively cited Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) data (e.g., O'Doherty, 1994; DEST 2000) indicate that girls have outperformed boys over at least the last ten years on the basis of mean TER scores. Moreover, these data suggest that, when the distributions of boys' and girls' scores are compared, boys are significantly over-represented in the lower ranges.

Through the recitation of such statistics, the underperformance of boys has been depicted as one of the most pressing educational issues of our time (Foster, *et al.*, 2001). Constructions depicting boys as disadvantaged in areas beyond the scope of academic achievement (behaviour and emotional health are common examples) have served to bolster the claim that boys' education is in 'crisis' (McQueen & Henwood, 2002). In turn, considerable resources have been spent in pursuit of answers as to 'why boys are failing', and in what way this may be the result of policy and practice through which schools are 'failing boys' (Spencer, 2001).

Concerns such as these have been identified throughout much of the English-speaking world (in Canada, New Zealand, The United Kingdom and The United States), as well as in Denmark, Germany and Japan (Connell, 1996). Indeed, as

Mahoney (1997:1) argues, anxiety about boys' academic performance may be seen to have reached "epidemic proportions when viewed from an international perspective".

Although cross-cultural constructions of the issue have varied in orientation and emphasis, commonalities in the conceptual framing of the boys' education 'crisis' have been identified across nation-states. In particular, commentators have noticed two pervasive assumptions within accounts of the 'problem': (1) the notion that boys, who until recently were 'doing better' than girls, are now 'losing out' at school (Kenway & Willis, 1996), and (2) the notion that girls' improved academic achievement has come 'at the expense' of that of boys (Weiner, Arnot & David, 1997). Through essentialized comparisons of gendered achievement, abstracted from discussion about the social and political location of schooling, dominant accounts have depicted boys as the 'new disadvantaged' within education systems worldwide (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

In the Australian setting, concern about male students' educational performance can be seen to have peaked in the early years of the new century. Although an issue of media interest since the mid 1990s, boys' 'failure' achieved particular political significance in the lead-up to the Federal election of 2001. Plans to redress male students' achievement decline were a central platform in the campaigns of both major parties, and were positioned, in this context, as a necessary component of any reform efforts geared towards educational 'excellence' and 'equity'.

In turn, The House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys (initiated in 2001 and re-adopted, after the election, in 2002) signaled the continuing national prominence of concern about Australia's 'failing boys', and represented the Government's initial phase of 'action' on this issue.

The House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys functioned to legitimate anxiety about male students' scholastic achievement, concluding that "there is justification for many concerns expressed about boys' education", and that "these concerns are not being adequately addressed within the current policy framework" (Commonwealth Government, 2003: 6) Moreover, the findings of the Inquiry served as the foundation for recommendations with regard to resource allocation and educational initiatives designed to remedy the 'problem'.

Based upon hearings, submissions and school visits, the Inquiry Committee's final report has informed both research and policy. Since it was tabled in October 2002, \$500,000 has been allocated to fund Australian research into pedagogical, curriculum and assessment issues relevant to boys over the period of 2003-4, and a review of the existing national gender policy *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* has been sought. In addition, the Government has allocated \$27 million over 2003-8 for use in programs such as the 'Boys' Lighthouse Schools' initiative (supporting 350 schools to develop and highlight effective teaching strategies for boys) and the 'Success for Boys' project (addressing areas of intervention for boys including positive male role models, literacy and information technology).

Given its political significance and educational impact, the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys represents an important site at which explanatory accounts of boys' academic 'underperformance' were accomplished and reproduced. For this reason, transcripts of Inquiry proceedings were chosen as data within which contemporary constructions of the boys' education 'crisis' could be critically examined.

Through the framework of discursive social psychology (Wetherell, 1998) this thesis investigates the specific formulation, and broader implications, of accounts of boys' 'underachievement'. Unlike the Inquiry from which it draws its data, this study does not hold that representations of male failure reflect an observable educational phenomenon whose 'causes' may be isolated and 'consequences' assessed. Rather, this thesis commences from a position of inquiry in which accounts of boys' underachievement are explored as potentially *constitutive* of the 'problem' they purport to reflect.

Representations of male underperformance (and the constructions of a boys' education 'crisis' they serve to support) are approached in the analysis to follow as cultural and historical products, accomplished in language, that have ideological and material consequences. That is, the reality of the 'problem of boys in schools' is not gauged via investigation as to whether or not male underachievement 'exists', but through examination of the discursive effect of *versions of this problem* in shaping the landscape of educational provision.

Through analysis attentive to the rhetorical structure and ideological function of contemporary accounts of boys' 'failure', this thesis investigates the ways in which dominant formulations of this 'problem' are attributed persuasive power. Further, it

examines the ways in which such constructions work in practice to counter alternative representations of the intersection of gender and achievement. This approach turns attention to the means by which constructions of boys' poor performance regulate knowledge about masculinity, femininity and performance at school – and to the effects of this regulation upon educational practice and policy.

To introduce the analytic approach of this thesis, I present a selection of headlines on the issue of boys' education that appeared in Australian newspapers over the period in which the House of Representatives Inquiry was conducted. These headlines are grouped to illustrate dominant rhetorical framings at the centre of media constructions of the boys' education 'crisis'. In general terms, discussion of these argumentative threads is provided to illustrate the broader discursive context of the Australian boys' education debate. More specifically, it serves to outline the analytic orientation to claims of boys' educational 'disadvantage' that is adopted throughout this thesis.

The headlines presented below draw on the pervasive assumptions (1) that boys are now 'falling behind' within education systems; that their relative underachievement is both 'new' and 'newsworthy', (2) that girls' new-found academic success is the result of contemporary school systems that 'disadvantage' boys, and (3) that boys' underachievement may unproblematically be taken to represent a problem *for*, not *of*, male students.

These assumptions will now be discussed.

1. Boys are now ‘falling behind’ within education systems; their relative underachievement is both ‘new’ and ‘newsworthy’

‘Boys’ school crisis’ (Bevin, *Northern Territorian*, 1/3/02)

‘Chasing the Girls’ (Arndt, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26/10/02)

‘Oh boy, you have a long way to go’ (Yallop, *The Australian*, 29/10/02)

‘Girls teach boys a lesson at all levels’ (author N/A, *The Courier Mail*, 18/9/03)

‘Girls outshine boys in academic world’ (Potrikus, *Sunday Telegraph*, 21/9/03)

Each of the headlines presented above may be seen to perform definitional work in establishing boys’ educational ‘underachievement’ as an important and newsworthy matter. From the outset, the use of the present tense situates boys’ (relatively) poor performance as a contemporary news issue of potentially ongoing concern. Further, broad formulations depicting girls’ superior attainment as evident “at all levels” and throughout the “academic world” heighten the severity of this problem as a phenomenon apparent across the educational board. Finally, and most significantly, these headlines naturalize a focus upon boys’ *versus* girls’ academic performance. It seems that global constructions such as “Girls outshine boys” function to present gender as the primary categorical feature relevant to issues of achievement, depicting boys and girls as academically distinct populations reaching manifestly disparate levels of attainment.

Homogenized constructions of ‘all girls’ as outperforming ‘all boys’, such as those evident above, will be investigated in Chapter 1 of this thesis. This introductory discussion interrogates dominant (media and scholarly) accounts of the ‘crisis’ in boys’ education, indicating that stories other than that of ‘male underperformance’ could be told about academic attainment data, and about the intersection of gender

and achievement. In this section, it is argued that accounts positioning gender as the central risk factor for academic underachievement work rhetorically to sideline concern about the impact of race and socio-economic status on educational success, as well as the failure of girls' academic attainment to translate into equal employment options and economic advantage. This review indicates that the 'problem' of boys' underachievement does not represent a 'new and observable phenomenon', but a socially and historically situated version of events that must be interrogated with regard to its role in reproducing educational, and broader social, inequalities.

2. Girls' newfound academic success is the result of contemporary school systems that 'disadvantage' boys

'School system failing boys' (Williams, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 22/3/01)

'Boys Need the Right Teacher: Principal' (Hewitt, *The West Australian*, 23/3/01)

'How modern teaching styles help girls outclass their male schoolmates' (Ferrari, *Sunday Telegraph*, 24/6/01)

'Boys set up to fail in new school system' (Donnelly, *Adelaide Advertiser*, 15/1/03)

'The matter with boys is that there aren't enough blokes in schools' (Doherty, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1/1/03)

Although implicit in some cases, the depiction of school as a place 'for girls' can be seen above to build the case that boys' underachievement results from 'unfair' and 'unbalanced' educational conditions. At the same time, the notion that boys possess inherent potential to succeed where teaching systems and methods are 'appropriate' remains unquestioned across these headlines. In each case, institutional and pedagogic interventions aimed at improving the attainment of male students are

positioned as a necessary means of reaching an ‘obvious’ (and politically ‘neutral’) educational objective: the facilitation of boys’ scholastic capacity.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis interrogate accounts that, like the headlines above, attribute boys’ underperformance to ‘unfair’ and ‘inappropriate’ educational conditions. In these sections, representations of boys’ failure as the result of ‘inadequate teachers’ and ‘feminized curriculum’ are examined, and attention is paid to the reification of boys’ innate potential supported by such constructions. It is argued that the depiction of teachers and curriculum as ‘to blame’ for boys’ underperformance functioned, throughout proceedings of the Public Inquiry, to position explicitly boy-friendly interventions in these areas as necessary for the maintenance of equity in the facilitation, and measurement, of academic achievement.

3. Boys’ underachievement may unproblematically be taken to represent a problem *for*, not *of*, male students.

‘War on boys? For not acting more like girls’ (Jackman, *Sunday Mail*, 9/7/00)

‘Boys suffer from ‘girls’ schools’ (Duffy, *Courier Mail*, 7/4/01)

‘How a level playing field became a schoolboy minefield’ (Shanahan, *The Australian*, 5/11/02)

‘Boys will be Boys...If You Let Them. Perth academic Ian Lillico believes the school system favours girls’ (Cook, *The Age*, 6/10/03)

Across the headlines above, boys and girls are constructed as competing populations engaged in the “war” for academic success. Male and female students are depicted

as disproportionately supported in this battle; an unequal “playing field” in schools is presented as having placed all boys at an achievement handicap.

Clearly, an evaluative component is evident in these descriptions of the contemporary academic terrain. A sense of moral outrage is established through the notion that male students’ failure reflects their ‘victim’ status in schools, rather than deficiencies of intellect or scholastic motivation. In turn, any critique of masculinity (for example, questioning the notion that boys *should* be encouraged to “be boys” in the hegemonic sense) is positioned as both unnecessary and unfair. Where “girls’ schools” facilitate the achievement of female students by ‘favouring’ their specific characteristics, it follows that educational practices problematizing *boys* may be positioned as discriminatory. This framework builds as obvious the notion that boys’ achievement will only be improved where schoolboy masculinity is accommodated, and male students stop being expected to be ‘something they are not’.

Chapter 5 of this thesis critiques the central assumption evident in the headlines above: that boys’ underachievement can, and should, be addressed *without* critical examination of the intersection of masculinity and schooling. Attention in this section is paid to constructions of the ‘nature of male students’ that went unexamined in accounts locating the ‘causes’ of boys’ failure external to boys themselves. Analysis of the binary representations through which witnesses made sense of male versus female learners demonstrates that masculinity was associated with an academic *problem* (boys’ widespread ‘failure’) yet simultaneously aligned with *authentic* academic engagement. It is argued that such accounts created an

identity dilemma for male students, and were implicated in the *reproduction* of boys' underachievement 'problem'.

Analysis of dominant accounts: the orientation of this thesis

The analysis presented in this thesis, as described in the above discussion, investigates explanatory accounts that were overwhelmingly dominant throughout proceedings of the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys. As such, the extracts subjected to detailed analysis are representative of salient and recurring argumentative patterns, rather than 'deviant' constructions or anomalous frameworks of accounting.

The choice to focus attention toward dominant explanations of boys' underachievement was made for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was decided that such an emphasis was commensurate with the aims of the proceedings from which this thesis draws its data. The Inquiry into the Education of Boys was initiated with a view to reaching consensual definitions of the issues affecting boys' achievement, and of 'best practice' with regard to ameliorating this problem. In turn, it was decided that an emphasis on dominant/shared constructions would enable analysis of the practices by which such accounts were positioned as persuasive, and were attributed rhetorical force.

Secondly, accounts in which speakers problematized the nature of the Inquiry, or the constructions of gender informing its terms of reference, were infrequent throughout proceedings, and largely absent from the Committee's final report. In turn, it was decided that a focus on more pervasive versions of the 'problem with

boys' would facilitate analysis of accounts that had, not only 'common-sense' appeal, but also powerful ideological *and* material effects.

In order to background the dominant explanatory frameworks that were evident throughout the Public Inquiry, attention now turns to the broader discursive context in which constructions of the boys' achievement 'crisis' may be seen to have arisen. In Chapter 1, pervasive popular and scholarly accounts of male students' failure are critically examined, and attention is paid to their role in shaping the rhetorical terrain of the boys' education debate.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: LOCATING THE 'CRISIS' IN BOYS' EDUCATION

It is particularly important in an era of panic over issues such as 'boys' educational underachievement' to retain and develop a critical understanding of forms of masculinity in educational contexts. Such panics confound issues concerning gender, 'race' and class in ways that do little service to boys or girls.
(Griffin & Lees, 1997:6)

1.1 Emergence of the 'crisis' in boys' education: the Australian context

Debate about boys' underachievement in Australia emerged in an educational (and broader social) context characterized by economic-rationalist restructuring, and the continuing influence of feminist theorizing and interventions aimed at raising the achievement of girls (Spencer, 2001).

The mass-media were central in establishing the 'boys issue' as a site of public concern, initiating debate in the early 1990s by broadcasting changing patterns of girls' and boys' achievement results in the New South Wales Higher School Certificate (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Yates (1997) explains that the 'problem' was first articulated when Sydney newspapers seized upon certain final year statistics (the focus of considerable attention within modern education systems) in which girls achieved some of the top results in mathematics for the very first time. Although these results concerned only a minority of students participating in some of the hardest and highest-level subjects, such statistics were taken up in media reports as evidence of an overall turnaround in gendered achievement patterns.

Moreover, they were taken to signify that feminist interventions for girls had 'reached their goals', and that the focus of educational concern should now be turned to the 'underachievement' of boys (Yates, 1997).

These media representations, in conjunction with an influential parents' body with 'Men's Movement' connections, served to extend concern about boys' achievement across state lines (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Since this time, an increasing volume of statistical 'evidence' has supported media accounts of boys' 'failure', and the prominence of the issue has been maintained through the institution of large-scale government inquiries into male underachievement (e.g., O'Doherty, 1994). Of these, the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry into The Education of Boys (from which this thesis draws its data) is the most recent, and prominent, example.

Since 'identifying' the issue, media constructions of boys' underachievement have presented a largely uniform picture, depicting an improvement in girls' overall school performance and a steep decline in that of boys (Kenway *et al.*, 1997). Yet, the case has been made that such reports have invariably essentialized the performance of girls and boys, remaining silent about the broad differentials between male and female power, and the failure of improved female retention and participation in schooling to convert into post-school opportunities and financial reward (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). The media have also been found to draw upon a wide range of statistics relating to social factors deemed representative of boys' 'broader disconnection', including their higher rates of suspension, expulsion, behavioural problems, truancy and over-representation in remedial classes (Gilbert

& Gilbert, 1998). These data have served to support the claim that boys have *replaced* girls as the (educationally and socially) disadvantaged gender as a result of “a decade of equal opportunities policy making deliberately aimed at girls and young women” (Weiner *et al.*, 1997:1).

1.2 Accounting for shifts in gendered attainment: deconstructing the ‘standard story’

In her retrospective analysis, Yates (1997) argues that the most pervasive ‘story’ about gender equity in schools to have been disseminated by the Australian media and government bodies would read as follows:

About 20 years ago, governments became aware that girls were being disadvantaged in schooling. They developed policies and funding to improve girls’ career aspirations, to make curriculum and pedagogy more ‘girl-friendly’, and to ensure equal spending on girls and boys. At the same time a huge amount of research and writing (academic and professional) was carried out on girls, their development and their needs. Over this period we have seen a large increase in the proportion of girls completing school as compared with boys, and their increasing success in ‘non-traditional’ subjects such as mathematics. Now it is time for more attention to the boys. Boys’ retention rates, learning difficulties, delinquency, suicide rates and general self-esteem are all cause for concern. We don’t want to take away from the girls’ programs, and more needs to be done in relation to issues such as sexual harassment in schools, but there is a dearth of good research and professional support for boys, and this is what should now occupy our urgent attention.

(Yates, 1997:338)

Yates contends that this account, representative of dominant versions of shifting gendered attainment patterns, must be interrogated with regard to its founding assumptions. As she explains, it is a story that presents the ‘facts of the case’ as if they may be taken for granted, deflecting attention from the ideological implications of this construction of events.

In her interrogation of this narrative, Yates identifies two domains of argument through which male students are positioned as the ‘new disadvantaged’: (1) boys’ current difficulties as measured by social indicators (suicide, delinquency, etc), and (2) their relative lack of academic success when compared to their female peers. She argues that reference to difficulties within these domains does not necessarily provide an unproblematic representation of a ‘new crisis’, but marks an historically specific version of ‘what counts’ in the context of school reform agendas.

Tracking the emergence of this ‘version’, Yates explains that many of the ‘social’ grounds on which the disadvantage of boys is now being justified were already known in the 1970s when gender equity programs were unanimously focused on improving the schooling of girls. Then, as now, boys were over-represented in ‘special education classes’ and were more likely to commit suicide, while girls’ retention and success rates in school were not of a pattern usually associated with disadvantaged groups. However, in the 70s, these indicators were *not* taken up as the most important means of identifying gender inequality in schools. Instead, Yates explains that the attention of reformers was directed towards the fact that, relative to actual levels of success in school, girls would reap less benefit than boys in terms of further educational opportunities and career ‘pay-off’. The primary focus at that time was on the inferior school *outcomes* girls experienced, and on the ways in which the education system contributed to the limitation of girls’ future paths through narrow and biased curriculum and pedagogy.

It is important, in the context of a thesis seeking to analyze contemporary accounts of boys’ educational ‘disadvantage’, to investigate whether the post-school

gendered patterns Yates describes have in fact been reversed. In Australia, educational reforms for girls, as well as changes in the labour market since the 1970s, have indeed seen girls stay on at school and enter tertiary study in higher numbers than they ever have in the past (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Yet there remains a heavy gender segmentation in university study. Although women now have higher university access and retention rates they are concentrated in fields such as education, nursing and social science, and under-represented in high pay-off fields such as engineering, architecture and mathematics (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Despite graduating in greater numbers from university-level Law, ten years on from graduation women are less likely than men to have remained lawyers, or to have been promoted from their original position (Goward, 2004). Although more girls than boys have completed Year 12 since the mid-1970s, women still make up only 26% of federal parliamentarians, and there has only ever been one female Australian High Court judge (Goward, 2004). Women continue to enter a narrow range of jobs and their weekly wage is, on average, only 66% of that earned by men (Summers, 2003). They are over-represented in low-level jobs, perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid work and are under-represented in managerial positions and on Boards (Goward, 2004). Australian women still outnumber men as sole parents, and an estimated childcare shortage of 1 million places has been posited as an explanation as to why the proportion of females in full-time work has not increased in thirty years (Summers, 2003).

In the light of statistics such as these, Yates and other educational theorists (e.g., Foster, 1994; Kenway *et al.*, 1997; Martino & Meyenn, 2001) have contested the notion that boys now experience a disadvantage equivalent to that once faced by girls. They have argued that taking up behavioural statistics and Year 12 results (rather than post-school educational and employment paths) as unproblematic indicators of 'who benefits from school' reframes the gender equity agenda away from an investigation of the "broader social location and effects" of education (Yates, 1997: 342).

Yates argues that, although statistics reporting indicators of boys' disengagement from school do indeed represent areas of serious concern for educators, they should not be taken up as unproblematic evidence that boys are now 'the disadvantaged gender'. As many of the grounds justifying school reforms for girls in the 70s still exist, the current discourse of 'boys' underachievement' cannot be held to reflect a reversal of 'gender disadvantage' as measured by a set of objective criteria. Instead, it seems that the benchmarks for disadvantage have, themselves, been shifted. This lends weight to the argument that the current 'problem' of boys' underachievement represents, not the discovery of a troubling new state of affairs, but a socially and historically situated version of what counts as 'disadvantage'. Yates argues that such an account may then be seen as ideological rather than neutral, and must be interrogated with regard to its potential role in reproducing educational, and broader social, inequalities.

In line with the above analysis, this thesis will critically examine contemporary constructions of boys' failure within transcripts of the House of Representatives

Inquiry into the Education of Boys – an Australia-wide investigation into boys' underachievement arguably informed by the 'standard story' of Yates' critique. This thesis will examine the rhetorical and linguistic practices through which dominant accounts of the boys' education 'crisis' were reproduced in this context, and attributed persuasive power.

As indicated by Yates' analysis, constructions of the 'crisis in boys' education' do not neutrally reflect a novel educational circumstance. Instead, they comprise selections as to (1) *what counts* as disadvantage (where it might be measured, and on what criteria), and (2) *whose* relative advantage should be the focus of inquiry on 'equity' grounds (in this case, boys' versus girls'). The depiction of these selections as self-evident, and the implications of such representations, will be the focus of critical attention in the remainder of this chapter.

In discussing the consequences of constructing boys as 'in crisis', Raphael Reed (1999: 99) argues that "particular explanatory paradigms imply certain forms of intervention; how you understand the 'nature of a problem' determining your prescription for 'remedy'". With this in mind, it seems that constructions of disadvantage that highlight male students must be interrogated in terms of the remedial actions that may flow from them. As such, the discussion that follows will background the analysis presented in subsequent chapters by way of a critical review of dominant (quantitative and qualitative) formulations of the 'crisis in boys' education'. These accounts will be discussed with regard to the interests they may be seen to serve, and their implications for educational reform.

1.3 Disaggregating gendered achievement data

The mobilization of comparative statistics has been the primary means through which the dominance of ‘boys crisis’ accounts has been established and maintained (Griffin, 2000). As Lingard and Douglas (1999) explain, a particular reading of these data focusing on abstracted, one-dimensional achievement differentials has served to argue an overall improvement in the performance of girls, and a decline in the overall performance (and behaviour) of boys. Yet critical educationalists, assessing the validity of these claims, argue that the relationship between gender and achievement is far more complex than is suggested within dominant, essentialized accounts. Indeed, they contend that blanket portrayals of girls as ‘out-performing boys’ do not withstand scrutiny when achievement data are disaggregated (e.g., Teese *et al.*, 1995). Through critical dissection of performance statistics, theorists have argued that girls and boys are not homogenous populations who uniformly achieve or fail (Gorard *et al.*, 1999), nor may the complexities of performance determinants be reduced to an account of boys as ‘doing worse than before’ or ‘worse than all girls’ (Murphy & Elwood, 1998). Providing an alternative construction, Epstein *et al.* (1998) argue that mainstream accounts of boys’ underachievement highlight gender difference despite evidence that:

There is more overlap between the attainment of boys and girls than there is difference; there are significant differences in the relative attainments of boys and girls in different subjects and at different levels; and, while there are many boys who are not performing well at schools, there are many others who are doing very well indeed (p. 10).

1.3.1 Statistical ‘evidence’ in the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys

In the final report from the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys (the proceedings of which will be analyzed in this thesis), a list of statistical

performance indicators is presented by way of introduction to the issue of boys' 'underachievement':

At the first public hearing of this inquiry the then Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs presented the following powerful evidence of the differentials in the educational achievements of boys and girls:

- nationally, girls' results in Year 3 and Year 5 Literacy Benchmark tests are up to five percentage points higher than boys';
- the Year 12 retention rate for girls is between 11 and 12 percentage points higher than it is for boys;
- girls' average levels of achievement in a majority of subjects assessed at senior secondary level are higher and the gap in the total has been widening, for example the difference between the aggregate NSW Tertiary Entrance Score for girls and boys widened from 0.6 to 19 percentage points between 1981 and 1996; and
- over 56 per cent of students in higher education are women.

(House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002: 1)

This summary works to background the findings to be presented in the report; to justify the significance of male underachievement as a national concern, and to ground discussion of the issue in "powerful evidence" of boys' failure across the educational board. The story supported by these data is one of boys' poor performance as evident at the primary level, where male students' literacy levels are well beneath those of girls, and in the final years of schooling where boys' participation and achievement rates are low and the gender gap is widening.

It has been argued that disaggregation of data of this kind presents a more complex picture, in which the patterns described may be seen to manifest quite differently depending upon the socio-cultural family resources, and geographical location, of the students whose results are at issue (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). The discussion to follow will review critical appraisals of such achievement statistics, with a view to

highlighting the socio-political and educational consequences of dominant, homogenized ‘failing boys’ accounts.

1.3.2 The impact of class and ‘race’/ethnicity

With regard to student literacy, critical educationalists have argued that achievement is powerfully influenced by the effects of socio-economic advantage, rurality and culture (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Drawing upon Year 3 literacy benchmark data, Alloway and Gilbert (1997) explain that, although girls outscore boys at every level of social advantage (ranked on a 10-point socio-economic scale), boys with the highest socio-economic rankings fare *better* than girls in the bottom five socio-economic categories. They also indicate that boys of the highest socio-economic status score below the state average for girls, while boys of the lowest status achieve poorer results than students in any other category. On the basis of these findings, Alloway and Gilbert (1997) contest the validity of essentialized accounts of boys’ ‘literacy underachievement’, explaining that these results “show very clearly that not all girls are doing well at literacy related tasks, and not all boys are doing equally poorly” (p.52).

Analysis of performance data has suggested that the picture of literacy achievement is further complicated when the impact of students’ cultural and geographical location is taken into account. In the context of Year 6 literacy testing in Queensland, Lingard & Douglas (1999) explain that students from non-English speaking backgrounds are routinely outperformed by their English-speaking peers, and that rural students attain lower outcomes than those in urban areas.

Significantly, although Aboriginal girls outperform Aboriginal boys, Indigenous students as a whole achieve the lowest average literacy scores of any targeted group.

The patterns identified by Lingard & Douglas (1999) have been replicated in other states (e.g., O'Doherty, 1994), where the trend has been for white, middle-class, urban girls to cluster at the top of literacy tables, and for Aboriginal and non-Anglo working-class boys to cluster at the bottom (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Ultimately, as Alloway and Gilbert (1997) argue, these findings suggest a strong relationship between literacy performance and class/cultural membership, the significance of which is effectively sidelined within dominant 'failing boys' accounts.

With regard to numeracy performance the gender balance changes, although the impact of class and race/ethnicity has been found to be no less marked. Queensland primary-level data have indicated no difference in the mathematical achievement of boys and girls (Lingard & Douglas, 1999), whereas New South Wales statistics demonstrate boys' slightly superior numeracy attainments at both Year 3 and Year 6 (O'Doherty, 1994). At tertiary level, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) cite mathematics results indicating a reversal of the gendered trends observed in the context of literacy. That is, they highlight that girls are more at risk than boys of mathematics failure within each socio-economic status category, and that girls from working-class families face the most significant risk of underachievement in this domain. Once again, a complex interaction between achievement and social advantage appears to mediate performance outcomes. It is interesting to note that the complexity of numeracy patterns, and their failure to conform to claims of boys'

broad-spectrum 'underachievement' are absent from the Inquiry's 'statistical overview' presented at the start of this discussion.

More prominent in the Inquiry's introductory data summary are claims of boys' underachievement in the final years of schooling. Indeed, gender differentials in Year 12 results, and in the 'Tertiary Entrance Rank' calculated from them, have been the primary sites of focus within the Australian 'boys debate' (Gill & Starr, 2000). However, despite highly publicized accounts of boys' 'underachievement' at this level, and of girls' ever-increasing 'success', attention to the impact of social advantage once again provides a far more nuanced picture. For example, analyses of Year 12 data have demonstrated that, although girls as a group may be seen to be 'out-performing' boys as a group, the gender differential is most marked among students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). As Teese *et al.* (1995) explain, the gender gap in senior-secondary achievement narrows as socio-economic status increases, and becomes sharper further down the spectrum of social advantage. On one hand, this pattern suggests that Aboriginal and working-class boys face significant obstacles to achievement, and are markedly less likely than even poor and Indigenous female students to reach high levels of academic attainment. On the other, these data suggest a form of 'middle-class convergence', whereby differentials in the achievement of middle-class boys and girls are becoming increasingly narrow (Walby, 1997).

It is important to note that data as to the significant underachievement of less advantaged boys and the marginal 'underperformance' of middle-class boys are subsumed (apparently with equal weight) into wholesale accounts of 'boys' failure'.

This is of particular significance when trends in the emergence of the Australian boys debate are considered. As Yates (1997) explains, the longstanding underachievement of working-class males was documented *well before* concern about 'failing boys' was established as an equity issue. Indeed, she suggests that broad-scale anxiety about boys' achievement was mobilized only when improvements in girls' results began to threaten the superiority of *middle-class* boys. Dominant, homogenized stories of boys' failure (such as that presented in the Inquiry's outline) may therefore be seen to do more than simply invite a focus on gender to the exclusion of class and 'race'. These accounts, although couched in the official rhetoric of 'equal opportunity', seem to be active in *reproducing* structural inequalities through the protection of dominant interests. Only now that the prospects of privileged boys are being threatened by female achievement has concern about the disadvantage of working-class boys been martialled on behalf of male students as a whole (McLean, 1996). As such, 'failing boys' accounts may be seen to turn the equity gaze away from inequalities around class and 'race' - the disadvantage of working-class boys serving to justify interventions aimed at raising the achievement of *all* (even middle-class) male students.

On the basis of the analyses presented above, critical educationalists have argued that it is essential to deconstruct broad gender categories when investigating claims as to 'who wins at school' (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Clearly, as Teese *et al.* (1995) explain, gender intersects with the educational effects of poverty, ethnicity and cultural location such that the central question is not "whether girls as a group or boys as a group are more disadvantaged but which girls and which boys" (p.109).

1.3.3 Different populations: the impact of subject choice and school retention on gendered achievement outcomes

In addition to marginalizing issues of 'race' and class, it has been argued that dominant accounts of boys' underachievement have failed to acknowledge differences between boys' and girls' patterns of educational participation (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). That is, mainstream comparisons of gendered achievement have been mounted on the assumption that male and female students, particularly at the Year 12 level, are equivalent populations engaged in comparable curricula. Critical analyses have suggested that this is not the case, indicating that comparisons of male and female performance outcomes are confounded by strong gendered patterns with regard to subject selection and school retention (Kenway *et al.*, 1997).

One of the most pervasive trends identified in comparative analyses of male and female students' engagement with school has been boys' overwhelming enrolment in mathematical and scientific subjects during the post-compulsory years of school (Kenway *et al.*, 1997). This pattern, argued to result from historical associations between technical knowledge and 'masculine rationality', has seen boys' choices cluster within a narrow range of 'non-subjective' learning domains – a circumstance that has had mixed results for students of differing levels of ability. Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) argue that, for many high-achieving boys, enrolment in subjects such as maths and science has brought considerable recognition and access to high-status, well-paying careers. For others, whose strengths lie elsewhere, the valorization of technical/rational subjects within the knowledge hierarchy has led to over-enrolment and *underperformance* in these areas.

The gendered nature of subject selection has been argued to make comparisons between male and female achievement difficult, particularly at the Year 12 level, for a number of associated reasons. First and foremost, it has been shown that boys' high enrolment in subjects such as maths and physics, even in the absence of ability in these areas, contributes to the positioning of boys at the extremes of academic outcome measures in terms of overall achievement (Teese *et al.*, 1995). This pattern has given rise to boys' 'saucer-shaped' distribution of results, in which a polarization between very high and very low outcomes has seen the average male attainment remain low (Buckingham, 1999). In contrast, girls' broader range of subject choices, and tendency to under-enrol in high-status subjects despite manifest ability, has seen their results cluster in the middle of performance distributions (Teese, *et al.*, 1995). The comparison of 'gender averages' at the Year 12 level is therefore fraught; the foregrounding of girls' marginally higher mean scores belying the impact of participation patterns – and the (very) high achievements of (some) male students.

In terms of gendered achievement in specific subjects, it has been argued that comparisons are equally, if not more, difficult. Mathematics results have been particularly contentious in this regard, given that female students' improved maths attainments have been central to constructions of girls as 'space invaders' in high-status, male-dominated academic terrain (Foster, 1996). Clearly, boys' over-enrolment is a confounding factor in relation to maths performance, producing a greater proportional failure in this subject. By contrast, girls have been found to under-enrol in advanced maths (as well as maths-based physics, economics and information technology subjects), and to under-estimate their ability in these areas

(Sukhnandan, 2000). The result of these patterns is that male and female mathematics students are very different populations in the senior schooling years: only a select group of girls (academically and in terms of social background) enrol in maths at this level, and those who do often only continue when reasonably assured of success (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Such patterns have been argued, not only to reduce the validity of within-subject comparisons of girls' and boys' attainments, but to obscure the broader gendered consequences of participation trends. As critical educationalists have explained, although it seems that both boys and girls must negotiate gender constraints in terms of subject selection, the 'disadvantage' that results from them is not of equal weight.

Teese *et al.* (1995) argue that, while male students' avoidance of humanities no doubt limits their social and academic resources, the clustering of boys in maths and science sees more boys than girls reap the tertiary and career benefits those high-status subjects convey. Even in many cases where boys 'underperform', the results they do achieve are still in areas that have considerable vocational leverage. Contrastingly, Teese *et al.* (1995) argue that girls' academic successes offer less tertiary and career payoff in that they are evident across an incoherent, less vocationally-oriented range of subjects. Ultimately, they argue that a pattern emerges in which high-ability girls do not accrue the rewards and outcomes gained by high-ability boys, given that humanities subjects bring penalties in terms of maximizing students' outcome scores and post-school employability.

On the basis of these analyses, the usefulness of comparisons between male and female Year 12 results in assessing educational outcomes has increasingly been questioned, the appraisal of 'high' versus 'low' achievement deemed less informative than investigation as to the nature and effects of different *kinds* of 'success'. Questions of this nature have been particularly important with regard to the issue of school retention, another area in which boys' relatively low figures have been taken to signify 'underachievement'.

While dominant accounts, such as the Inquiry's overview statement, depict boys' higher rates of post-compulsory school-leaving as necessarily problematic, critical theorists have argued that other interpretations may be drawn. Indeed, many educationalists have explained that girls' improving school retention may be seen to reflect continuing *barriers* to their equal participation in post-school life. It has been argued that the increasing number of girls who complete Year 12 do so because they have more invested in education; their options for vocational training outside it are fewer, and traditionally 'female' occupations have required higher levels of schooling (Kenway & Willis, 1996). As Kenway *et al.* (1997) explain, even with the same qualifications women can often expect to earn less than men, such that girls' improved school retention and achievement does not mean parity in the labour market "partly because many workplaces are heavily coded by traditional gender conventions and partly because of the relationship between family and paid work" (p.50). Critical theorists have therefore argued that accounts taking girls' high retention rates as evidence of 'advantage' obscure what may be seen instead as a paradoxical gendered relationship between achievement/retention and post-school

options: girls' success at school does not translate into superior (or, often, even *equal*) employment opportunities and financial reward (Kenway & Willis, 1996).

1.3.4 Statistical stories of boys' 'underachievement': the perspective of this thesis

The discussion presented above indicates that stories *other* than that of boys' 'underachievement' could be told about educational performance data, and about the intersection of gender and academic 'success'. The aim of the review provided was not to contend that versions of boys' failure are 'wrong', but to highlight the constructed nature of such accounts – and to show that dominant stories as to 'the facts' of boys' underperformance are implicated in establishing and reproducing the problem they purport to 'reflect'.

The purpose of the above review was not to claim that no boys experience educational 'disadvantage'. It seems clear that many boys feel alienated within the school system, reaching low levels of academic attainment and experiencing social and emotional distress. Likewise, although it is evident that women continue to face barriers to equal participation in academic, social and economic life, it seems many girls *are* making effective and successful use of school – a circumstance that should be celebrated. However, it is also clear that educational benefits and detriments are not experienced equally by male and female students, nor are they equivalent for all members *within* gender groups. It seems that dominant (apparently 'neutral') accounts of boys' 'educational underachievement' obscure these patterns – to ideological, and material, effect.

The critical analyses presented above indicate that performance statistics do not 'speak for themselves', enabling the nature and consequences of educational disadvantage to be objectively assessed. This review has shown that such accounts relay attainment data in a manner that actively constructs 'being a boy' as the central risk factor for underachievement, and that functions to sideline considerations such as 'race', class, participation and post-school options in the assessment of 'who wins at school'. Given that dominant accounts of boys' failure have already begun to shape educational resource allocation and pedagogic reform (Martino *et al.*, 2004), it seems imperative that these versions be interrogated with regard to their potential role in maintaining and exacerbating educational (and broader social) inequalities.

1.4 Critical and qualitative analyses of the boys' education 'crisis'

The specific form and function of the explanatory frameworks in which performance data have been mobilized has been the focus of critical, qualitative analysis within the 'failing boys' debate. In addition to highlighting possible alternative interpretations of achievement statistics, these investigations have attended to (1) the argumentative structure of dominant accounts of boys' 'poor performance', (2) to the theoretical underpinnings of these pervasive 'stories' and (3) to their implications for reform. Such analyses have been sensitive to the founding assumptions of mainstream reports of boys' 'underachievement', and to the interests they may be seen to serve. Moreover, they have turned attention to constructions of 'education', 'equity' and 'gender' that have been central to accounts of the boys' education 'crisis', and that have established the 'failure' of male students as a legitimate site of concern.

Epstein *et al.* (1998) provide one such qualitative discussion, detailing what they describe as three dominant discourses that have “achieved an international currency” in debates around boys’ underperformance: the ‘poor boys’ discourse; the ‘failing schools’ discourse; and the ‘boys will be boys’ discourse (p.6). These explanatory patterns will be reviewed below, and attention will be paid to the theoretical underpinnings, and implications for reform, at the heart of each of these frameworks.

1.4.1 Pity the ‘poor boys’

Epstein *et al.* (1998) argue that a discourse entreating parents and educators to ‘pity the poor boys’ has been dominant, internationally, within accounts of male students’ academic underperformance. This explanatory framework has also been labelled the ‘Lads’ Movement’, in that it may be seen to draw upon ‘Men’s Movement’ accounts of feminism as having destabilized and devalued traditional masculinity, to the extent that recuperative efforts are now ‘required’ for men and boys (Kenway, 1997).

In broad terms, Epstein *et al.* explain that ‘poor boys’ lines of argument blame women for boys’ failure, positioning young men as the victims of feminist teachers and single mothers whose priorities and abilities are at odds with masculine requirements. Moreover, they serve to depict male students as disadvantaged within feminized education systems that are argued to foreground female needs – presenting boys’ academic failure as the corollary of girls’ success.

Epstein *et al.* argue that ‘poor boys’ accounts have been grounded in the reactionary claims of Men’s Movement authors such as Steve Biddulph in Australia (e.g. Biddulph, 1994), Neil Lydon in the UK (e.g. Lydon, 1996) and Robert Bly in the US (e.g. Bly, 1990), who argue that boys’ underachievement reflects a broader ‘cultural assault’ on traditional masculinity. While differing slightly in their proposed solutions to boys’ ‘failure’, each of these writers advocates a return to a more ‘natural’ gender regime, in which men and women know their place, and may use their inherent and complementary powers.

The application of this framework to boys’ underachievement has resulted in solutions described by Lingard and Douglas (1999) as ‘recuperative masculinity’ strategies. Dominant claims that “boys’ specific needs are subsumed under the priority given to girls and minority concerns, leaving them in the role of villains who must change in order to alleviate the problems they cause” (Lingard & Douglas 1999:133) have served to justify interventions aimed at re-instating and re-valuing ‘maligned’ male ways of being. An approach of this kind is evident in the following extract, taken from an education department report into the performance of Year 8 boys:

... males are having to reconcile themselves to a reversal of roles. They face the loss of their traditional superiority...They have no formal ‘men’s liberation movement’, no informal male equivalent of ‘the sisterhood’, to help them cope with their increasing loss of identity, their disaffection and their sense of hopelessness.

(Bleach *et al.*, 1996: 6, cited by Foster *et al.*, 2001)

As Foster *et al.* (2001) explain, this excerpt demonstrates the central premise of recuperative programs: that boys and girls are different but face equal disadvantages – disadvantages that are currently being *unequally* addressed, to the detriment of boys.

Epstein *et al.* (1998) argue that recuperative efforts aimed at improving boys' rates of success, rather than challenging hegemonic versions of (white, heterosexual, able-bodied) masculinity, work actively to re-instate them. Of these 'solutions', they explain that two have had particular currency: a proposed 'masculinization' of teaching styles, and the promotion of 'male mentors' in schools.

As Foster *et al.* (2001) argue, each of these interventions holds the potential, not only to marginalize girls, but to re-establish the gendered practices that feminist educators have sought to eliminate. They contend that calls for a masculinization of pedagogy subvert critical findings that girls needs in the classroom often *continue* to be ignored, while boys monopolize both equipment and teachers' time, and more frequently demonstrate intimidatory behaviour. Similarly, many educationalists have questioned the adoption of unproblematized notions of masculinity entrenched in 'positive male role models' (Raphael Reed, 1999; Skelton, 1994). The validity and gender-ethics of male mentor programs have been critiqued at the classroom level, given evidence that many male teachers adopt a 'macho' style of interaction that limits the full participation of their female pupils (Mac an Ghail, 1994). At a more general level, such interventions have been depicted as a "covert way of reintroducing unequal gender relations between boys/girls and men/women" (Jackson, 1998:78) through the reinforcement of women's inadequacies as educators *and* as role models. As McLean (1996, citing Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994) asks, what does it tell a boy about his teacher, his mother, and about women in general, if a man must be brought in to 'take charge'?

1.4.2 Failing schools failing boys

Claims that ‘failing schools’ are ‘failing boys’ comprise the second discourse identified by Epstein *et al.* (1998). These authors argue that such a framework of accounting for boys’ underachievement has emerged in countries whose education systems have been restructured in line with economic rationalist principles. In these systems, oriented to the use of performance indicators as proof of policy success and efficient resource allocation, a ‘failing school’ may be defined as one that does not produce students with high literacy and numeracy attainments or above-average passes in public examinations. As Foster *et al.* (2001) explain, such schools have been seen to be ‘failing’ the boys (and girls) who attend them.

Epstein *et al.* argue that the globalized ‘failing schools failing boys’ discourse “takes different forms and proffers different solutions in different countries” (1998: 8) according to local incarnations of neo-liberal economic theory. In Canada and the UK, they explain that economic rationalism has manifested in concern with notions of ‘school effectiveness’ and ‘school improvement’. A result of this focus in the UK has been the publication of league tables (detailing examination results and inspection reports) and the introduction of policy aimed at ‘naming and shaming’ underperforming schools (Spencer, 2001). In Australia and New Zealand, the move has been towards ‘outcomes-based’ education, a shift that has seen the increasing ‘marketization’ of schooling, and an emphasis on between-school competition as a means of raising academic standards (Spencer, 2001).

It has been argued that the development of a closer relationship between education and the economy has been shaped by the policy presumption that the ‘global

competitiveness' of a country is determined by the educational standards of the students who represent its future workforce (Raphael Reed, 1999). Through accounts of national prosperity as dependent upon academic proficiency, Epstein *et al.* argue that the underachievement of boys has been positioned as a problem with educational *and* economic consequences. Indeed, in the New Zealand context, Spencer (2001) cites a national Education Review Office Report making claims to this effect:

New Zealand's future economic prosperity and social cohesion depend on giving all students (boys as well as girls) the opportunity to succeed to their full potential.

(Education Review Office, 1999:7-8 cited by Spencer, 2001)

As Epstein *et al.* explain, the notion that high levels of knowledge and skill are required if a nation is to be internationally competitive has seen the monitoring of academic standards reach paramount importance. Techniques of audit, contract and the appraisal of outcomes to justify resource allocation have served to position performance indicators at the centre of educational management and policy initiatives (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Given this focus on attainment data, and dominant rationalist notions that outcomes must be raised via increased efficiency and reduced expenditure, academic 'underachievement' has become increasingly detectable. It is this climate, argues Raphael Reed (1998:41), that has enabled underperforming boys to be isolated as a target for reform:

In a context of competition between schools for students, academic achievement becomes highly visible and even heightened through such mechanisms as parental choice and 'measures' of teacher effectivity while explanations of, and solutions to, underachievement proliferate. Individual students or groups of students (such as boys) become crucial in determining the overall academic performance of schools, geared to the demands of the competition state.

(Raphael Reed 1998:41)

According to Epstein *et al.* 'failing schools' accounts of male underachievement justify a focus on boys (in the form of targeted policy attention and resource

allocation) framed within the politically neutral rhetoric of ‘raising educational standards’. Through the depiction of ‘failing boys’ and the ‘failing school’ as largely synonymous (low literacy standards, problem behaviour and truancy have been dominant features of each), such accounts have effectively conflated ‘increased educational efficiency’ with strategies aimed at raising the academic achievement of boys (Raphael Reed, 1998).

As Epstein *et al.* explain, this framework for school improvement is under-theorized with regard to the structural and cultural inequalities that continue to impact upon the profiles of ‘failing schools’. At worst, Raphael Reed argues that this paradigm works to re-appropriate social justice principles as part of an increasingly market-oriented perspective on achievement – and to redirect resources to support the boys’ agenda on (redefined) ‘equity’ grounds. Gill and Starr (2000) argue that this re-framing may work to re-instate resource benefits *lost* to boys through the very economic shifts now serving to position their achievement as a focus of concern:

It is not surprising that the issues about boys are being raised at a time when economic rationalism has stripped state schools of many of their resources, reducing their ability to offer one-to-one assistance, counselling services and remedial or special education services – resources that serve mainly boys.

(Gill & Starr, 2000: 330)

Ultimately, Epstein *et al.* argue that the ‘failing schools failing boys’ discourse may be seen to serve similar ends to that imploring the community to ‘pity the poor boys’. While not making explicit attacks on feminism, the ‘failing schools’ framework may be seen to ‘recuperate’ male interests through its ostensibly neutral ‘standards focus’ – an emphasis which reduces concern about inequality to a focus on the achievement of boys.

1.4.3 Boys will be boys

The final key discourse identified by Epstein *et al.* is that which centres around the common-sense notion that ‘boys will be boys’. This discourse, they explain, explicitly locates the cause of male students’ underachievement in the lack of ‘fit’ between contemporary educational expectations and boys’ biological, and psychological, needs and capacities.

‘Boys will be boys’ accounts have been found to share features of the ‘poor boys’ discourse, in that they work to depict male students as disadvantaged within education systems disproportionately ‘suited’ to feminine learning capabilities. Significantly, in a discourse through which performance differentials are linked to gendered learning preferences embedded in the brain, the underachievement of boys is positioned as a problem of inadequate curriculum and pedagogy. Epstein *et al.* note the contradictory nature of this framework:

What is particularly interesting...is the way it manages, at one and the same time, to posit an unchanging and unchangeable ‘boyness’, which involves aggression, fighting and delayed (some might say indefinitely!) maturity and yet situates poor achievement at school as extrinsic to boys themselves.

(Epstein *et al.*, 1998: 9)

Proposed solutions to male underachievement offered from a ‘boys will be boys’ perspective have been found to reformulate strategies developed by feminists to address *female* educational disadvantage. Interventions within this framework have been oriented to rehabilitating ‘inherent’ masculine qualities through the introduction of male role models and single-sex classes (Spencer, 2001). In addition, boys’ advocates have called for programs assisting male students’ entry into non-traditional subject domains through the inclusion of tasks that ‘appeal to masculine interests’ (Foster *et al.*, 2001).

Interventions of this kind have been critiqued by feminist educationalists, who have argued that these proposals are grounded in a central problematic assumption: that boys now face a comparable ‘disadvantage’ to that once faced by girls (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Critical theorists have contested this notion, arguing that the appropriation of strategies employed in the context of initiatives for girls represents a “naïve and simplistic” approach to contemporary gender reform (Kenway *et al.*, 1997: 50).

Essentialized ‘boys will be boys’ accounts have invariably served to justify reform efforts working to accommodate, and naturalize, traits associated with hegemonic masculinity (Epstein *et al.*, 1998). Not surprisingly, therefore, educationalists have noted that sport and compulsory heterosexuality have been central to these approaches (Martino & Paillotta Chiarolli, 2003). For example, Foster *et al.* (2000) describe the many interventions, framed within this paradigm, that have used football to encourage boys’ engagement, involving prominent players in programs designed to stimulate male students’ interest.

According to advocates of the ‘boys will be boys’ framework, programs of this kind tap boys’ natural predilection for rumbustious play, competition and risk-taking, incorporating these preferences into an education system where they are usually ‘stifled’ to boys’ peril (e.g., Biddulph, 1994). According to boys’ activists such as Gurian (1996, 1998), the routine avoidance and undervaluing of these traits is a central *cause* of boys’ often aggressive academic disconnection, leaving them no other means of displaying the masculinity they are trying desperately to ‘prove’.

As Foster *et al.* (2001) explain, many academics have roundly contested the use of violent and competitive sports as a means of tackling boys' underachievement. They argue that such programs sediment and valorize 'macho' stereotypes, leading to the marginalization, not only of girls, but of less-than-macho boys.

Other interventions drawing upon biologically-based constructions of the 'nature of boys' have also been debated. Of particular significance have been reform efforts advocating the use of girls to teach, civilize and moderate the behaviour of their male peers. This framework for addressing boys' underachievement has been argued to rest upon entrenched notions of women as responsible for controlling men, particularly in relation to sexuality (Epstein *et al.*, 1998). As Epstein *et al.* argue, this approach has its basis in the 'heterosexualization' of schools, a feature of the continuing valorization of hegemonic masculinity within education systems. The result of this orientation, they explain, may be seen in the notion that:

Boys will not only be boys, it seems, they will be heterosexual boys; and it is because they are (assumed to be) heterosexual boys that the presumption is made that the civilizing influence of girls will work.

(Epstein *et al.*, 1998:9)

In summarizing the effects of reform initiatives grounded in the notion that 'boys will be boys', Foster *et al.* (2001) argue that a particular version of masculinity is promoted whenever 'boyhood' is treated as an unproblematic effect of biological sex difference. From a critical perspective, they contend that the only reasonable response to images of hard-wired (violent, heterosexist) masculinity is to decide whether to organize schools so as to maximize or minimize these 'natural' predispositions. As they argue:

Biology alone cannot answer that question, and claiming that boys will be boys only leads us to abandon our political responsibility

(Foster *et al.*, 2001:18)

1.5 Exploring the implications of dominant ‘failing boys’ accounts

Critical and discursive theorists have argued that prevailing conceptualizations of the ‘boys’ achievement crisis’, as described in the above review, comprise common ideological assumptions and consequences. Given the dominance of such frameworks within government, media and popular stories of boys’ ‘failure’, it seems imperative that these versions be interrogated, and account taken of their role in shaping the landscape of educational reform.

A central criticism levelled at each of the frameworks described has been the claim that they mobilize homogenized representations of male and female students. That is, they are held to present decontextualized comparisons of male versus female success, without meaningful discussion of the power inequalities (pertaining, particularly, to race, class and sexuality) that *confound* gendered achievement patterns (Griffin, 2000). In each case, this is argued to have been accomplished within accounts that foreground between-gender differences, at the expense of discussion as to *within-group* variation. In turn, these frameworks have served to support one-dimensional, sensationalized reports that all girls are now out-performing all boys in education – a claim Lingard and Douglas describe as a “patently absurd observation” (1999:97).

Through a focus on essentialized gender comparisons, dominant accounts have been held to re-inscribe binary oppositions between boys and girls, masculinity and

femininity, such that girls' success is constructed as having been achieved 'at the expense' of boys.

Although it has been argued that there is little evidence to suggest that male failure has been the corollary of female success (Weiner *et al.*, 1997), mainstream accounts (particularly those drawing upon a 'poor boys' discourse) have constructed a framework in which boys and girls are set up as 'competing victims' (Cox, 1995) within policy and resource debates. These accounts have established a story of opposition and blame in which feminists are held responsible for having suited girls' interests (constructed as being entirely at odds with those of boys) such that male students have become the 'new disadvantaged' within education systems (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). This framework has been critiqued, not only for its erasure of continuing gendered power differentials, but because of the negative consequences of 'victim' positionings in the context of a global economy. As Australian feminist Eva Cox (1995) points out, constructing the members of either gender as 'victims' may prove counterproductive in this climate. Given that market forces set 'victims' against each other in the fight for scarce resources, she argues that possible outcomes are likely to be grim for *all* competitors, regardless of their gender group membership.

Perhaps the most pervasive criticism levelled at mainstream accounts of boys' 'failure' has been the claim that each of these frameworks abstracts concern about male underachievement from its political location, enabling the broader effects of patriarchy and continuing gender privilege to be effectively erased (Connell, 1996). Through a model of 'gender as equivalence' it has been argued that dominant

accounts ignore the ongoing asymmetry of gender relations, depicting continuing efforts for girls – and the allegedly ‘resultant’ failure of boys – as ‘discriminatory’ interventions.

Feminist educationalists have rejected constructions of ‘presumptive equality’ (Foster, 1994) inherent in such accounts of boys’ achievement ‘disadvantage’. That is, they have contested the claim that boys and girls now experience comparable academic benefits and obstacles as a result of their gender, such that the underachievement of either group automatically necessitates targeted interventions for the other for the preservation of academic equity. Critical theorists have suggested that this framework not only obfuscates continuing differentials between male and female power in schooling and society, but depicts boys’ current ‘underperformance’ as a disadvantage *of the same order* as that faced by girls prior to feminist reform (Foster *et al.*, 2001). Given the significant educational, social and economic ramifications of accounts positioning boys as today’s ‘second sex’, critical educationalists have argued that contemporary constructions of ‘gender equivalence’ must be carefully deconstructed.

Providing one such appraisal, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue that it is educationally and politically problematic to insert ‘underachieving boys’ into reform efforts mirroring those that have been put in place for girls. They explain that accounts of ‘presumptive equality’ fail to address the forces of privilege and power impacting upon educational engagement – the historical/political location of schooling and its ongoing gendered effects.

1.5.1 Appropriating feminist interventions as a ‘framework for action’ in boys’ education

Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) trace feminist reform efforts through three chronological phases, considering each with regard to contemporary constructions of *boys’* educational ‘needs’. They explain that interventions for girls shifted from an initial focus on equity and access, to a curricular emphasis on valuing previously sidelined female knowledge and experience. From there, reform efforts were broadened to encompass the diversity of experiences of femininity, and to address social and cultural components of the construction of gendered subjectivities.

Considering the appropriation of these emphases in the context of the ‘boys’ agenda’, Gilbert and Gilbert identify immediate and obvious differences. At the level of access and equity, they argue that boys cannot be seen to face comparable barriers to those girls have experienced. While legitimate concerns have been raised as to boys’ participation in language-rich and Arts subjects, most boys do not lose out financially or vocationally because of this limited access. Whereas girls could be shown the professional and economic benefits of moving into traditionally ‘masculine’ subject areas, the same cannot be said for boys’ entry into Arts and Humanities. Gilbert and Gilbert explain that to depict these circumstances as equivalent is to abstract ‘equity’ concerns from their social and political effects. They argue that boys’ subject selection brings status and power – the abdication of which cannot be expected to be palatable or easy – a circumstance that has not been the case for girls. Likewise, Gilbert and Gilbert highlight that boys’ achievement is not impeded in terms of their access to teachers’ time and to educational resources. Indeed, it has been documented that many girls continue to receive less attention

from their teachers, and to have access to fewer resources in terms of educational and behavioural support (Gill & Starr, 2000).

At the second level, Gilbert and Gilbert demonstrate that boys do not face comparable difficulties to girls in terms of knowledge construction and the selection of curricular resources. They explain that girls' improved results have not been achieved within a curriculum that exclusively foregrounds female experience and readings of society. Indeed, they argue, this shift in achievement patterns has been observed in a curricular context that continues to valorize technical/rational 'masculine' subjects, and in which the examination of male experience and constructions of knowledge has remained central, even in ('feminine') subject English.

It is at the third level of gender reform – a focus on students' negotiation of masculinity/femininity in educational contexts – that boys' difficulties and limitations come more clearly into focus. Even within the range of educational issues presented in this chapter, it seems clear that hegemonic versions of 'how to be a boy' constrain male students' options for engagement with school. It is evident that the accessibility of certain subject selections and vocational orientations is affected by narrow and stereotypical versions of masculinity. It is also apparent that essentialized accounts of boys' 'nature' (how boys *should* be?) marginalize male students whose cultural background, physical ability and/or sexual preference do not fit neatly within this mould. As Gilbert & Gilbert explain,

Boys' insertion into dominant stories of masculinity and maleness predisposes them to reject and resist literacy and humanities subjects in favour of numeracy and vocational learning; to dominate and compete in classroom and playground areas for space, time and attention; to valorize sport and sporting prowess; to devalue

qualities of nurturing, caring, sharing and loving. And many institutional and educational practices implicitly endorse and reinforce boys' choices.

(1998: 24)

It seems that the deconstruction of dominant practices and expectations of masculinity is required if boys are to engage more freely, and more *successfully*, with a range of educational behaviours and identities. As Connell (1996) argues, this would require a de-centring of masculinity, an understanding of 'boyhood' as 'performance' rather than 'essence', and an acknowledgement of the complexity and diversity of masculine experience – a 'gender multiculturalism' that would open up to all people a range of gender possibilities. At the heart of such a shift would be a critical examination of masculinities, femininities and schooling (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

Yet, as is clear from the accounts of boys' underachievement presented in this chapter, such a conceptualization of this issue has *not* been pervasive within the reform efforts that have been advocated and enacted for male students. Appraisal of the intersection of masculinity and schooling has been absent from dominant accounts that have tended to shield hegemonic, valorized masculine ways of being from critical analysis.

As Kenway *et al.* (1997) have argued, a dominant educational and political commitment to accommodating (rather than critically examining) hegemonic masculinity can be seen most clearly when constructions of 1970s/80s 'underachieving girls', and of today's 'failing boys', are directly compared. These authors explain that, in Australia, initial attempts to achieve educational parity for female students positioned girls within a 'deficit framework'. Through this lens,

girls' deviance was measured against male norms, their poor performance attributed to an inherent 'lack' of the qualities required for educational success. 'Low self-esteem' and 'fear of success' were among dominant explanations invariably locating the causes of girls' underachievement within female students themselves (Hayes, 1998).

In comparison, the contemporary construction of boys' underachievement as the result of *external* educational obstacles (feminized schools, single mothers, the 'devaluation' of masculine skills) presents this issue as a problem *for*, not *of*, male students (Hey *et al.*, 1998). Clearly, although many mainstream accounts depict girls' past and boys' present disadvantage as 'comparable situations', the gender positionings inherent in accounts of these circumstances are anything but equivalent. While femininity was problematized in the context of girls' underachievement, it is evident that masculinity is largely *protected from scrutiny* in present-day accounts of boys' failure. The role of this contrast in bolstering the very system of gender relations by which boys' (*and* girls') educational options are constrained remains un-theorized and unquestioned.

On the basis of historical analysis, Michèle Cohen (2004; 1998; 1996) argues that the deflection of attention away from masculinity in circumstances of boys' underachievement is by no means a new educational trend. Indeed, Cohen argues that, while boys have been found to 'underperform' academically at *many* historical junctures, this pattern has never been meaningfully addressed. Rather, she explains, dominant accounts have naturalized boys' achievement (even in its absence), and

pathologized girls' demonstrated success, through contrasting gendered explanations of under/achievement such as those described above.

Cohen's analysis provides the historical perspective and analytic framework for this thesis, and will be described below.

1.5.2 Cohen's historical perspective on boys' underachievement

In her historical analysis of the relationship between gender and achievement from the late 17th Century to the present, Cohen (1998) brings two significant insights to bear upon discussion of boys' current 'underperformance'. First, she argues that boys have *always* underachieved, a finding that troubles contemporary accounts of boys' 'failure' as a new and startling trend. Secondly, she explains that, by way of persistent gendered patterns in the organization and deployment of discourse on achievement, this underperformance has "never been seriously addressed" (p. 20).

The basis for Cohen's argument lies in what she identifies as a paradoxical pattern in accounting for gendered achievement differentials. Her analysis reveals that, when boys have demonstrated good academic performance, their results have historically been attributed to internal valued qualities – to the 'nature' of their (masculine) intellect. When boys have *underachieved* these attributions have been reversed, and male failure deemed the result of external factors – inadequate teachers, methods and texts. On the other hand, when accounting for female achievement, Cohen finds that explanations have reflected the inverse of this pattern. Girls' successes, she argues, have been downplayed as the consequence of

(external) advantageous conditions, whereas their poor performance has been unequivocally linked to (internal) ability deficits.

These explanatory patterns, Cohen argues, have had significant and continuing effects upon understandings of the gendered nature of scholarship. At one level, these trends have seen the poor performance of boys 'explained away', their failure taken as evidence that educational practices need simply to be 'improved'. At another, they have worked to invalidate girls' successes, the relative 'over-achievement' of female students serving as an (unacknowledged) engine for educational change. Ultimately, these accounts have served to repackage female superiority such that the 'proper' hierarchy of gendered intellect has been effectively restored. Yet, as Cohen explains, these patterns have worked to produce and maintain a 'fiction' of boys' potential that has not served male students well.

The depiction of boys' poor performance as evidence that they 'possess what it takes to succeed', and the corresponding depiction of girls' achievement as evidence of 'lack', has established what Cohen describes as a paradoxical relationship between gender and achievement. This relationship, linked to historical associations between masculinity and the 'rationality' deemed inherent to authentic academic success, has seen teaching practices and curricular emphases repeatedly shifted in order that boys' 'inherent capacity to achieve' might be more effectively accommodated. Cohen argues that this pattern of reform has worked to naturalize boys' success (even in the absence of high performance) and to pathologize girls' manifest achievement.

Ultimately, Cohen argues, this trend has worked to *perpetuate* the problem of boys' underachievement. Through the construction of male students' academic success as 'inevitable', dominant versions of masculinity that may be seen to *limit* boys' options for successful engagement with school (such as the naturalized notion that boys should 'succeed without trying') have not been challenged, but accommodated. A focus on the intersection of masculinity and schooling has been entirely absent from accounts situating the 'causes' of male students' failure as external to boys themselves. As such, Cohen explains, the apparent disjunction between appropriate, valued male ways of being and behaviours required for effective engagement at school has historically been protected from analysis, attention directed instead to the methods, teachers and texts deemed inadequate because they have failed to facilitate boys' 'natural' capacity. In turn, curricular and pedagogic practices have continually been revised and shifted to enable the manifestation of boys' potential – efforts that have worked to accommodate and reproduce existing gendered limitations with regard to academic engagement.

On the basis of such historical evidence, Cohen argues that dominant, contemporary constructions of male students' failure are implicated in the maintenance and reproduction of the boys' 'achievement crisis'. By externalizing the causes of boys' underperformance, and by valorizing the hegemonic characteristics of male learners even in a context of their low attainment, she explains that educators and policy-makers risk perpetuating the very 'problem' they are trying to solve. Cohen summarizes this dilemma as follows:

The problems around boys in today's schools cannot be examined simply as 'results' of present circumstances, especially when these include an alleged feminization of schooling, of achievement, of the teaching profession...or of textbooks to explain boys' failure. Unless historical considerations, and in

particular the historical construction of masculinity are brought to bear on the analysis, interventions are likely, at best, to perpetuate the current problems, and at worse, to threaten the gains made for sex equity since the 1970s.

(Cohen 1998:22)

1.6 Adopting Cohen's findings as a framework for analysis – overview of the thesis

The patterns of accounting for boys' underachievement identified by Cohen were overwhelmingly salient within the Hansard record of the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys. Almost invariably, the academic failure of male students was constructed as a problem *for* (not *of*) boys, the underachievement of this group pervasively attributed to 'inadequate teachers' and 'inappropriate curriculum'. In addition, despite arising within a context of acknowledged 'poor performance', accounts of boys' failure routinely *valorized* qualities deemed to be 'inherent to male learners'. The problematization of hegemonic 'boyness' was largely absent from accounts that attributed male underperformance to a lack of 'fit' between contemporary expectations and ('valued', 'authentic') masculine learning characteristics.

While it is not the intention of this thesis to argue that the underachievement of boys *is* a problem 'intrinsic' to male students, nor to contend that this issue *can only* be helpfully addressed through an investigation of masculinity construction, Cohen's argument nonetheless provides a useful, initial analytic framework. In a thesis that aims to investigate the educational and political consequences of constructions of boys' 'failure', it seems fruitful to organize analysis around features of this debate that have demonstrated historical implications, and potentially significant ongoing effects.

As such, the investigation to be presented will draw upon Cohen's findings that:

- 1) accounts of boys' educational failure have historically attributed this 'problem' to inadequate teachers and academic methods;
and that
- 2) such accounts have therefore precluded investigation into the intersection of masculinity and schooling, to the end that the effects of this junction remain unquestioned and under-theorized.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis will address the first of the above concerns, directing analytic attention to accounts of boys' failure that construct this phenomenon as the result of external educational conditions. Chapter 5 will turn attention to the second of these issues, investigating constructions of masculinity (and femininity) in the context of educational achievement debates.

More specifically, Chapter 3 will focus upon dominant constructions of boys' underachievement as the result of 'inadequate teachers'. This chapter will investigate accounts of educators as being 'critical' to the manifestation of boys' potential – constructions that served to position boys as 'blameless' with regard to their underperformance. Analysis will address the naturalization of boys' inherent 'needs' and 'abilities' that was central to such accounts, illustrating that the construction of these qualities as 'immutable' worked to position teachers and their methods as the only avenues through which boys' results might be improved. In turn, it will be shown that accounts of teacher responsibility worked to protect and

reify the notion of boys' 'inherent ability', and to depict the provision of conditions necessary for its manifestation as an educational, and *moral*, requirement.

Chapter 4 will address constructions of boys' failure as the result of inappropriate, 'feminized' academic curricula. Analysis of these accounts will focus on the construction of boys' specific 'capacities,' as opposed to gendered 'needs'. Attention will be paid to the ways in which male students were protected from blame for their failure through the depiction of contemporary curricula as 'suited' to girls' abilities, and 'skewed against' those of boys. It will be argued that this type of construction also served to reify boys' potential, attributing the failure of male students to 'discriminatory' content and testing formats held to have precluded the manifestation of their natural capacities. Further, it will be shown that such accounts worked to re-package girls' achievements as the fictive result of this 'curriculum bias', building the necessity that changes be made to subject matter and assessment practices for the maintenance, not only of 'fairness', but of 'accuracy' in reporting academic attainment.

Whereas Chapters 3 and 4 will focus upon the issues of causation and responsibility for boys' underperformance, Chapter 5 will turn attention to constructions of 'the male learner himself' within explanatory accounts of boys' achievement decline. This chapter will address the intersection of 'male ways of being' and educational performance, providing a critical analysis of the masculinity/achievement nexus that Cohen (1998) argues has been historically absent from investigations of boys' 'failure'.

In the final analytic chapter, it will be argued that witnesses to the Inquiry established a contradictory discursive framework in building representations of male and female learners. Five interpretative repertoires will be identified in this regard, each of which will be shown to depend upon a relational contrast between boys and girls that positioned masculinity and femininity as dichotomous categories, associated respectively with the binary poles of unequally valued learning behaviours (activity vs. passivity, compliance vs. resistance, meaningless learning vs. meaningful learning, attention to detail vs. real understanding and manipulation vs. integrity). It will be argued that these dichotomies worked to naturalize the success of boys *even when it is not evident*, and to *pathologize* girls' manifest achievement, through the conflation of masculine traits with *authentic scholarship*. This pattern will be shown to produce a series of dilemmas with regard to boys' identity positioning, between the maintenance of a masculine identity (requiring the 'activity' and 'independence' characteristic of 'genuine scholarship') and successful engagement with school (where good results often require 'feminine' behaviours such as compliance and passivity). Ultimately, it will be argued that speakers building accounts in which masculinity was simultaneously problematized (boys are underachieving) and valorized (boys are superior, authentic learners even when they fail) risked perpetuating the very problem they were aiming to solve.

As can be seen from these chapter overviews, the discursive approach of this thesis (to be outlined in more detail in Chapter 2, to follow) will enable features of the boys' achievement debate, identified by Cohen (1998), to be analyzed with regard to their specific formulation and broader implications. This approach facilitates a more nuanced analysis of contemporary accounts of boys' failure, addressing the

“conditions of possibility” (Janks, 1997) by which they are supported, as well as the rhetorical structure and ideological function of their local accomplishment.

In addition, a discursive approach enables investigation of constructions of ‘how and what boys *are*’ that are central to explanatory accounts of ‘why boys are failing’ and ‘how they should be helped’. By identifying the limits of these constructions, this thesis aims to draw attention to the space we have available to draw flexibly on *alternative* representations of gendered learners – space in which we might use our ‘productive’ power to challenge and expand the options for effective academic engagement available to *all* school students.

CHAPTER 2

THEORY AND METHOD

In the previous chapter, dominant statistical and explanatory frameworks within the boys' achievement debate were reviewed and critically examined. It was argued that data-driven accounts (depicting 'male underachievement' as a phenomenon that may be objectively assessed and neutrally reported) establish this problem as a new, incontrovertible and increasingly troubling educational issue. Yet, disaggregation of the performance statistics in which such claims are typically based highlights the constructed nature of these versions. It was argued that ostensibly evidence-based 'failing boys' accounts obfuscate the social, political and economic effects of defining this problem as evidence of a disadvantage uniformly faced by *all* male students.

Likewise, in a review of explanatory framings of boys' underperformance, it was argued that dominant accounts of boys' failure are steeped in essentialized constructions of 'what it is to be a boy'. It was shown that such constructions work to *constitute* the gender differences they seek to 'reflect', serving to homogenize male students (downplaying within-group variability and the potential marginalization of non-dominant group members) and working to naturalize a gender-comparative approach to issues of achievement and equity. Further, it was argued that accounts of this kind absent discussion as to the socio-political location of the issue of male underachievement – a problem that Cohen (2004, 1998, 1996) argues reproduces the historical patterns through which boys' failure has been protected from meaningful analysis.

In summary, it was argued that dominant quantitative and qualitative accounts of boys' underachievement work to constitute the nature of the problem they purport to 'explain'. It was shown that the constructive power of these versions places discursive limits around issues of gender and achievement such that options for conceptualizing and addressing 'problems' in this domain are effectively constrained.

In investigating contemporary explanations/constructions of boys' underachievement, this thesis aims to address each of the concerns outlined above and in the previous chapter with regard to dominant accounts. This will be achieved through the application of five key theoretical elements of a critical, discursive approach to analysis, each of which will be described below.

2.1 The discursive approach of this thesis: key theoretical tenets

2.1.1 A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge

The first element of the discursive approach adopted in this thesis is a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge – an understanding that there are no determinate relationships between our representations of the world and a 'reality' beyond them (Burr, 1995). Such an approach seems particularly useful in addressing debate about boys' failure, given that discussion on this topic has been characterized by shifting assumptions and definitional selections in terms of what may be seen to count as 'achievement' and 'disadvantage'. The present study will avoid the problems inherent in a positivist investigation as to whether or not male underperformance 'exists' through the adoption of a discursive perspective. Within

this theoretical and methodological framework, questions as to the ‘reality’ of male underachievement are set aside, and the focus turns instead to the discursive practices that enable *versions* of this ‘problem’ to be accomplished and reproduced.

2.1.2 A central concern with language as constitutive of lived ‘realities’

The critical stance of this thesis is facilitated through the second element of a discourse analytic perspective – a focus on language as the object of inquiry (Gill, 1996). Whereas the approaches outlined in the previous chapter treat language as a neutral medium through which the ‘truth’ about gender and achievement may be explored, analyzed and ultimately recorded, this thesis treats talk about boys’ failure as a topic of investigation *in its own right*.

The central discourse analytic concern with language is grounded in an understanding of talk and text as ‘constitutive’, rather than ‘reflective’, of the objects and events it describes (Potter, 1997). Through this lens, it is argued that it is impossible to adopt a ‘perspectiveless’ stance on the world from which objective representations of reality might be neutrally produced (Burr, 1995). Rather, a discursive approach views language as the means by which the nature of our lived ‘realities’ is actively constructed.

In the context of analyzing versions of the ‘boys’ achievement crisis’, a focus on the constitutive power of language is particularly illuminating. As was argued in the previous chapter, accounts of boys’ failure comprise various levels of selection as to what may be seen to count as ‘disadvantage’, where such disadvantage might be measured, and on what evaluative criteria. Further, accounts mobilizing gender

comparisons with regard to achievement were shown to make relevant certain realms of description in defining the ‘nature’ of boys – frequently foregrounding homogeneity (rather than within-group variability) and ‘naturalized’ masculine traits. As such, it seems clear that these accounts, rather than ‘reflecting’ the problem of boys’ achievement, work to constitute the very ‘nature’ of this issue, and of the population it is held to ‘affect’. In turn, positivist efforts aimed at revealing the underlying ‘causes’ of boys’ failure may be seen to be less fruitful than an approach that identifies language – the site in which this ‘problem’ is produced and maintained – as the focus of critical inquiry.

2.1.3 An understanding of knowledge as a social, interactional accomplishment

In line with a focus on the ‘productive’ power of language, this thesis takes a discursive orientation to knowledge and meaning-making as social accomplishments. This third element of a critical, discursive approach provides a specific location in which the constitutive nature of language might be analyzed and assessed: the interactional settings wherein social realities are produced and contested. This perspective treats interaction as the primary site in which constructions and evaluations are developed and undermined – in the argumentative context of accounts oriented to performing/supporting specific social actions (Puchta & Potter, 2004).

Because the focus of such a discursive analysis is on the role of language in setting up and knocking down social realities (Antaki, 1994), it is necessary to address its situated use. As such, in contrast to the abstracted summary of explanatory accounts of boys’ failure provided by Epstein *et al.* (1998, summarized in the previous

chapter as the 'Poor Boys', 'Failing Schools Failing Boys' and 'Boys will be Boys' discourses), this thesis will analyze how versions of this problem were mobilized within the interactional context of hearings held as part of an Inquiry into Boys' Education. A focus on naturally occasioned accounting will enable the analysis to address the ways in which constructions of boys' failure are formulated, mobilized and attributed persuasive power – as well as the ways in which they work in practice to counter alternative versions of the relationship between gender and achievement. This approach will also permit a focus on versions of masculinity (and femininity) inherent in accounts of boys' 'failure', enabling these phenomena to be treated, likewise, as interactional accomplishments.

2.1.4 An acknowledgement that representations of reality are socio-historically and politically contingent

An emphasis on interaction as the site in which meanings are generated works in conjunction with the fourth element of a discursive approach: an acknowledgement that interactional accomplishments are socially and historically specific. While mainstream accounts were critiqued in the previous chapter for abstracting concern about boys' achievement from the socio-political setting in which it emerges, the analysis presented in this thesis acknowledges the 'contingent' nature of accounts of boys' failure.

From a discursive perspective, this thesis holds that versions of the boys' achievement 'problem' are mediated by the 'conditions of possibility' (Janks, 1997) provided by the socio-historical and political context in which they are situated. That is, such accounts are constrained by what is 'sayable' about boys' achievement within a given setting. This range of explanatory options is limited to resources

provided by history (for example, through sedimented constructions of the nature of boys and of schools), and by emerging interests and forces (for example, the recent economic restructuring of schools that has increased the visibility of male underachievement). The ‘problem’ of boys’ poor performance may therefore be seen, not as a factual and unitary construct, but as a dynamic phenomenon, its construction contingent upon culturally available linguistic resources and socio-political practices.

2.1.5 A focus on the ideological consequences of discourse

A final element of a discursive approach to analysis is a focus on the ways in which versions of objects and events – constituted in language, accomplished in interaction and grounded in socio-historically available resources – enable or constrain social actions. This emphasis turns attention towards the ways in which constructions of boys’ poor performance regulate knowledge with regard to gender and achievement, delimiting the questions we can ask, and the potential pathways for development in this area (Raphael Reed, 1999). Further, it enables a focus upon the means by which dominant accounts of the ‘boys issue’ limit the range of remedial options that are relevant (or even meaningful) in addressing a problem of this kind – and the effect of these limits in shaping the ‘reality’ of educational practice and policy.

2.2 Locating the discursive approach of this thesis

Discourse analysis is best understood as “a field of research rather than a single practice” (Taylor, 2001a: 5). Within this field, a variety of approaches have emerged that differ in their orientation to, and weighting of, the third and fourth analytic tenets described in the previous section – issues pertaining to the occasioned,

rhetorical nature of talk, and to the regulatory force of discursive formulations. Although discourse analytic approaches share a broad focus on the constitutive role of language, two methodological strands have developed, differing in their claims as to how the location and effects of construction might be usefully, and validly, investigated (Burr, 1995).

One of these approaches, discursive psychology, draws upon conversation analytic and ethnomethodological traditions to focus upon the internal workings, and performative aspects, of talk (Edwards & Potter, 1992). This perspective attends, particularly, to the rhetorical nature of accounting, and the interactional practices that warrant specific versions being produced.

A second approach draws upon post-structuralist conceptions of discourse, enabling claims as to the political and ideological consequences of specific frameworks of accounting (Wetherell, 1998). This perspective facilitates a focus upon the relationship between meaning-making and social action more broadly.

Although some analysts argue that these approaches must remain theoretically and methodologically distinct (e.g. Parker 1992, Potter, 2000), others advocate an analytic orientation employing insights from each of these traditions. A 'synthetic' discourse analysis (Wetherell, 1998), considering the local accomplishment of specific accounts *and* their ideological implications, has enabled highly productive analyses – particularly with regard to investigations of men and masculinity (e.g., Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Riley, 2002; Willot & Griffin, 1997).

It has been argued that such a 'synthetic' approach enables discourse analysis to address "not only the ways in which men are positioned by ready-made or historically given sets of discourses or interpretative repertoires, but also the ways in which these cultural resources are manipulated and exploited within particular rhetorical or micro-political contexts" (Edley & Wetherell, 1997: 206). For these reasons, a 'synthetic' analytic orientation – located within the field Wetherell (1998) labels 'critical discursive social psychology' – is adopted in this thesis. It is argued that such an approach will enable a focus on the action-oriented design features (Riley, 2001) of contemporary accounts of boys' failure. Moreover, it will locate these constructions within a genealogical context; an analytic perspective Cohen (1998) argues has been missing from mainstream analyses of the boys' achievement 'crisis'.

To expand upon the theoretical basis of this synthetic methodology, the two analytic orientations synthesized within the critical discursive approach of this thesis will be described in more detail.

2.2.1 From the Conversation Analytic tradition - a focus on the action-orientation of talk

An 'synthetic' approach to discourse analysis draws from the conversation analytic tradition a focus on the 'action-orientation' of language (Heritage, 1984). This perspective treats language as occasioned within interaction to *do* particular things: to blame, justify or build the factual nature of specific accounts (Potter, 2003). A synthetic discursive method incorporates this focus, acknowledging that "how talk is produced and how the meanings of that talk are determined are the practical, social and interactional accomplishments of members of a culture" (Hutchby &

Wooffitt, 1998:1). In turn, attention is oriented to a fine-grained analysis of the functional features of language within such productive, interactional settings (Riley, 2001).

In line with Wetherell's (1998) synthetic approach, this thesis draws upon conversation analysis in identifying the "internal working of talk", focusing on the interactional practices that warrant the production of specific accounts (Riley, 2002: 446). In addition, the analysis develops a focus on *rhetoric* – the ways in which descriptions and explanations are organized to be persuasive, and to counter alternative versions (Taylor, 2001a). This perspective turns attention to the argumentative strategies that organize convincing accounts, and to the manoeuvres by which they may be credibly undermined (LeCouteur *et al.*, 2001).

In this thesis, an emphasis on the action-oriented and rhetorical nature of talk is adopted *in conjunction* with consideration of the ideological implications of specific patterns of accounting. This dual focus has been advocated on the grounds that it attends to "the highly occasioned and situated nature of meaning-making, while relating these locally managed positions to the background normative conceptions that organize such accounts" (Riley, 2002:447). The basis of this second analytic concern – a focus on the organizing features and implications of talk – will now be discussed.

2.2.2 From the Post-structuralist tradition: a concern with the broader implications of meaning-making

In addition to a focus on the action-oriented deployment of language, critical discursive analysis treats talk and text as necessarily implicated in the reproduction,

or resistance, of broader systems of power. Drawing upon post-structuralist conceptions of discourse, the approach of this thesis addresses the ways in which contemporary practices are regulated through the social production of different forms of knowledge.

This theoretical position holds that all explanatory frameworks and descriptive constructions are embedded within a discursive context provided by history (Wetherell, 1998). Yet, it is argued that the sense-making resources available within an interactional setting are not equally accessible; some are culturally hegemonic and therefore 'easier to say' (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). A central focus of critical analysis, then, is the naturalization/normalization of dominant discursive formulations (Edley, 2001). This approach attends to the ways in which certain frameworks of accounting are endorsed or legitimated, to the interests served by these resources, and to the function of these patterns in enabling (or constraining) specific social actions.

Drawing on these insights, critical discursive analysis aims to examine, not only the construction of social practices and institutions, but the subject positions afforded individuals in relation to these phenomena. In other words, this approach investigates the identities made relevant and available by certain ways of talking. These identities are conceptualized as locations in which individuals are positioned by talk and text, and which simultaneously produce and constrain their options for action and meaning-making (Davies & Harre, 1990). A focus on the subject positions made available by dominant formulations acknowledges that people are both the products and producers of discourse (Billig, 1991), enabling critical

discursive analyses to examine “not only how identities are produced on and for particular occasions, but also how history or culture both impinge upon and are transformed by those performances” (Edley, 2001: 190).

2.3 Critical discursive social psychology and defining ‘relevant context’

The ‘multi-level’ approach of this thesis, incorporating insights from both of the traditions outlined above, brings with it specific epistemological and methodological issues. Although the perspectives combined in this approach share an understanding of talk as constrained by the setting in which it is occasioned, they differ in their understanding of ‘context’ as a legitimate analyst’s concern (Riley, 2002). Ongoing debates between conversation analysts and those employing post-structuralist approaches have been characterized by considerable disagreement as to whether or not attention to the political and historical location of talk should be brought to bear on analysis (e.g. Speer, 1999; Wetherell, 1998). Given that the present study aims to draw upon each of these perspectives, it seems important to address this debate, and to locate the approach of this thesis within it.

In the Conversation Analytic tradition (e.g. Schegloff, 1991; Potter, 2000), it is argued that the social and historical context of talk is only relevant to analysis when participants themselves ‘orient’ to issues of this nature. In other words, CA theory holds that broader cultural understandings – associated with categories such as ‘gender’ or ‘power’ – should be “understood only in the context that is built up by interactants as they display their understandings of social actions” (Stokoe, 2000). In turn, researchers do not go ‘beyond the data’ in the analysis of interactional

accomplishments; talk is understood to be ‘about’ what participants make it ‘about’ as interaction proceeds (Taylor, 2001a).

From this perspective, CA researchers have criticized the ‘grandiosity’ of poststructuralist-inspired analysts who impose their own frames of reference upon the talk they examine rather than working *within* participants’ *own* conceptual frameworks (Wetherell, 1998). They have argued that to incorporate analyst concerns with social/institutional contexts is to undermine a focus on interaction and construction, treating talk as if it is *determined* by its location within a socio-cultural setting (Potter, 2004).

In response to such claims, poststructuralist analysts and those concerned with power and subjectivity have argued that attention to the discursive history/location of talk is central to the production of meaningful analyses (Edley, 2001). These researchers have argued that CA’s exclusive focus upon ‘participant concerns’ means that this method fails to attend to the wider cultural positioning of discursive accounts, or to “explicate members’ knowledge of the social structures that shape conversational interaction” (Abell & Stokoe, 2001: 421). More broadly, conversation analysts have been criticized for failing to connect their micro-level observations to the social structures that surround them and, in turn, for failing to produce effective political commentary (Stokoe, 2000). In addition, it has been argued that CA techniques, advocated as a means of avoiding the imposition of researchers’ preconceptions, are *not* ideologically neutral, but inevitably comprise analytic selections (with regard to data excerpts) and categorizations (with regard to

the labelling and treatment of conversational features) that go *beyond* participant orientations (Wetherell, 1998).

It seems clear that each of these perspectives brings analytic benefits and potential methodological concerns. Yet, critical discursive analyses have effectively synthesized these perspectives within a method sensitive to locally-managed, participant concerns *as well as* to the socio-historical location of interactional accomplishments (e.g., Wetherell, 1998; Riley, 2002). The version of ‘critical discursive social psychology’ (Wetherell, 1998) adopted in this thesis aims to align itself with such projects, exploring the notion that discourse is shaped by (and shapes) the “local pragmatics of [a] particular interactional context, but also much broader or more global patterns in collective sense-making and understanding” (Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

2.4 Reflexivity and ethics

In discursive research, the issue of reflexivity (an acknowledgement that research texts are themselves implicated in reality construction) is inexorably linked to concern about ethical analytic engagement. Indeed, as Taylor (2001a: 20) explains, “ethical obligations...are highlighted when the researcher acknowledges her or his own presence within the research process and also abandons the claim to be discovering the truth”. In presenting my analysis of constructions of boys’ underachievement – itself an account reflecting a specific set of interests and ethical orientations – it is therefore important that I acknowledge, and even *utilize*, the influence of my own identity on the ‘version’ my thesis represents (Atkinson, 1990). As such, the discussion of reflexivity and ethics offered below will make

visible, and central, the elements of my identity relevant to the analysis provided. Specifically, I will address the parts I play within the social world in which this research was conducted – my roles as researcher, feminist and (sometime) educator – that comprise the ‘speaking position’ (Burman, 1997) from which this thesis is produced.

2.4.1 The analyst as researcher – exploring the issues of reflexivity and validation

Within the positivist, scientific tradition, researchers seek to provide neutral, objective data analyses, precluding the impact of ‘bias’ on the ‘findings’ they convey (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discourse analytic researchers, on the other hand, acknowledge the reflexive nature of the research process; the notion that the researcher and the research are mutually constitutive and can not be meaningfully separated (Taylor, 2001a). This understanding has implications for the ways in which the discourse analyst, and the accounts they provide, may be conceptualized within the research process.

At one level, an acceptance of reflexivity requires that a researcher acknowledge their influence. Rather than assuming a ‘service’ role, the analyst is positioned as central to the selection of research topics, the collection of data and the presentation of analysis (Taylor, 2001a). My ‘feminist’ and ‘educator’ identities are certainly relevant in this regard, and will be discussed in the sections that follow. At another level, an understanding of reflexivity calls for researchers to acknowledge the ‘productive’ nature of the analyses they offer. As a researcher, I must therefore acknowledge that, just as the accounts I analyze are not neutral representations

within the 'boys' achievement debate', neither is the analytic account of them that I provide.

The notion of reflexivity involves a recognition that "texts do not simply and transparently report an independent order of reality. Rather, the texts themselves are implicated in the work of reality construction" (Atkinson, 1990: 6). From an analytic perspective, this does not reflect a research weakness or an issue of 'bias', but an acknowledgement that truth is "also inevitably influenced and altered by any processes through which a researcher attempts to investigate and represent it" (Taylor, 2001b: 319). However, an abandonment of the search for 'truth' leads to difficulties in evaluating discourse analytic research, precisely because traditional conceptions of analytic 'validity' hold that findings should be assessed against an objective, external reality. For this reason, scholars have developed alternative means by which discursive analyses may be 'validated'.

As Potter and Wetherell, (1987) argue, analysis may be seen to achieve validity through its location in relation to previously published work, and through its production of original analyses of previously analyzed topics. With regard to these issues, this thesis locates itself in relation to other broadly discursive analyses of boys' underachievement (in particular, Cohen, 1998), adding the dimensions of a 'synthetic' analytic approach and a focus on naturally occasioned and contemporary accounting.

Potter & Wetherell (1987) also advocate an emphasis on inconsistency and diversity as a means of ensuring analytic validity. As Taylor (2001b) explains, such a focus is

particularly useful in the analysis of interpretative repertoires, where inconsistencies “can signal the ‘boundaries’ of different repertoires and so serve as another form of validation of the analyses by the participants themselves” (p.320). In accordance with this notion, the present study aims to address repertoires of boys’ failure with a particular focus on the *variation* and *contradictions* inherent within these accounts.

Finally, following Speer & Potter (2002), this thesis aims to provide sufficient detail with regard to the data and analytic process/outcomes to enable the reader to draw their own conclusions as to the validity of the claims presented.

2.4.2 The analyst as feminist – exploring the issue of political engagement

As Taylor (2001a) explains, the identity of discursive researchers is relevant to their analysis from the moment they select a topic consonant with their “personal interests, sympathies and political beliefs” (p.17). My identity as a feminist, committed to challenging inequitable systems of gendered power relations, is therefore intrinsically connected to the ‘shape’ of the research I present in this thesis.

My initial interest in accounts of boys’ ‘underachievement’ was grounded in concern that a preoccupation with male students’ failure would have a negative impact on girls. My fear was that a policy and resource focus on improving the outcomes of boys would reverse gains for female participation achieved since the 1970s, diverting attention from education’s contribution to the *ongoing* gender asymmetry of social, political and economic power.

At the same time, I was as concerned as it seemed the media were about ‘disaffected boys’, whose rates of truancy, suspension and exclusion suggested a very uneasy relationship with school. As the daughter of a primary school teacher, I had heard too many stories about real life ‘failing boys’ to remain unmoved, or to dismiss the ‘boys issue’ as simple backlash fabrication. In short, I hoped that a discursive investigation into accounts of boys’ ‘failure’ might produce insights applicable to the interests of both male *and* female students.

Yet, in the course of my PhD research, the identity positions that inspired my interest in this project brought with them ethical concerns. As my study progressed I became aware of potential tensions between the adoption of a (broadly) constructionist epistemology and a political commitment to feminist analysis. In turn, dilemmas arose as to the compatibility of a feminist approach and my commitment to facilitating and expanding *boys’* options for effective educational engagement. While I don’t profess to have entirely settled these issues, it seems important to outline the ‘working resolution’ that ultimately informed this thesis.

2.4.2.1 Feminist engagement and constructionist epistemology

In recent years, feminist (and pro-feminist) academics have questioned the notion that constructionist and broadly ‘post-modern’ epistemologies can support politically engaged analyses. Specifically, they have argued that the adoption of a critical stance against certainties represents a ‘flight from politics’ - assuming that social change requires the organizational guidance of pre-given truths about women and the operation of oppression. The claim, from this perspective, has been that by contesting/destabilizing gender-oppressive practices, constructionist research also

‘throws out’ any notion of an essential ‘femaleness’ in which political action for the emancipation of women and girls might effectively be grounded.

In this thesis, I do reject the authority of essentialized notions of the nature of men and women (more specifically, of boys and girls), instead treating masculinity and femininity as social accomplishments negotiated within interactional contexts. However, I do not see such a focus on the construction of gender as inconsistent with commitment to a position that both acknowledges, and aims to challenge, inequitable gender relations. Following Hepburn (1999), I would argue that a rejection of certainty about gendered identities does not represent a rejection of commitment to the eradication of women’s oppression. Indeed, as Hepburn explains, a post-modern stance may enable more accountability and ethical reflexivity than a feminism based in a *version* of femaleness that inevitably (and *unaccountably*) serves certain interests. Hepburn argues that a post-modern perspective, rather than grounding politics in pre-given truths about women, can remain ever attentive to the *use* of such truths – enabling a greater understanding of their practical effects and oppressive consequences.

In this thesis, representations of male underachievement will be analyzed with a particular focus on the situated constructions of ‘boyiness’ – and ‘girliness’ – they comprise. It is argued that such an emphasis provides feminist impetus precisely because it calls into question the notion of fixed gender categories. This approach enables interrogation of the dominant constructions of ‘what it is to be a gendered learner’ that work to justify educational interventions for boys – interventions serving (potentially) to *reproduce* the structures by which girls’ equal participation,

and academic recognition, continue to be constrained. This work is 'feminist', then, because it examines the oppressive functions gendered categories serve, rather than accepting them as a necessary grounding for political claims (Hepburn, 1999).

2.4.2.2 Feminist engagement and commitment to the education of boys

At the same time as acknowledging and challenging gender inequalities in schools and society, this thesis aims to investigate the uneasy relationship between (some) male school students and successful academic engagement. I argue that the critical, feminist approach of this study is entirely consistent with a genuine concern for boys' achievement at school. Indeed, this perspective aims to *deconstruct* the gender binaries through which serving the interests of girls and boys might otherwise be positioned as mutually exclusive efforts.

Many boys' 'advocates' contend that male students' underachievement reflects the numerous ways in which boys (like girls) are restricted by oppressive and stereotyped gender conventions. This argument holds that, while many of the constraints on girls have been addressed by feminists in policy and practice, boys' restrictions have remained unchallenged. Such claims have justified the positioning of boys as the 'new disadvantaged' in education, supporting calls for targeted interventions on behalf of all male students.

Following McLean (1996), I would argue that, while it is meaningless to suggest boys are oppressed on the grounds of their gender, it is legitimate to argue that they may *suffer* (educationally and otherwise) as a result of conforming to gender stereotypes. However, it is imperative to recognize that this suffering contributes to

the maintenance of systems by which others are oppressed. In this vein, I would argue that efforts to address boys' disconnection might be usefully directed, not into targeted 'boy-friendly' programs, but into expanding feminist-inspired analyses and programs addressing the construction of gender in educational contexts. Such projects may be seen to have indirect value for male students, in that it will always be of benefit for boys to see girls as peers and equals, and to know that any success they achieve is not supported by discriminatory systems of power. Moreover, such projects also offer boys *direct* benefits – expanding gendered options for engagement with school, and developing ways in which male students may work together with girls in a broader struggle for equity and social justice (McLean, 1996). It is hoped that the present thesis might align itself with projects of this kind.

2.4.3 The analyst as educator – exploring the ethics of a 'critical' approach

Another identity position from which I speak in this thesis has been opened to me through work I have undertaken in educational settings. Although limited, my teaching experience within school and university contexts has provided insights into the incredible instructional, emotional and performative demands made of educators within increasingly outcomes-focused education systems. In turn, these insights have shaped my analysis of accounts within the Inquiry into the Education of Boys – the majority of which were produced by teachers and professionals working in the area of children's services.

Given my espoused 'teacher-friendly' standpoint, it has been interesting explaining to others the nature of my research – work that provides a critical analysis of (primarily) teachers' talk. Indeed, I myself have questioned the ethics of taking a

critical approach to accounts provided by those who ‘actually do the work’ of educating children. Is it ethically supportable to scrutinize and critically examine the talk of (important, valuable) witnesses, who gave their time to appear before a Committee with the express intention of helping (male) students? I would argue that it is – largely because this thesis shares their aim.

It is important to note that the focus of ‘critical’ attention in discursive research is not on individual speakers, but on the resources with which accounts are built. That is, the aim of this research is not to ‘criticize’ teachers, but to address the functions and consequences of the versions of boys’ ‘failure’ that they provide – versions reflecting pragmatic and specific interactional concerns, as well as broader patterns of collective understanding (Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

At the same time, while this thesis aims to highlight (potentially) discriminatory gender representations within teachers’ accounts of boys’ ‘underachievement’, I can not pretend that I play no role in the maintenance of such constructions. Although I would hope not to mobilize them, I may nevertheless be held to be implicated in reproducing the gender representations this thesis aims to critique: I participate in the cultural practices, and socio-economic/political institutions that maintain the ‘intelligibility’ of these formulations. Nonetheless, I would argue that this thesis highlights, and perhaps makes more accessible, some spaces in which dominant and limiting constructions of masculinity and femininity might be resisted – a challenge for which not only teachers are responsible.

2.5 Interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions: outlining the analytic focus of this thesis

2.5.1 Interpretative repertoires

In broad terms, the analysis presented in this thesis focuses upon the multiple and often contradictory explanatory resources drawn upon to account for boys' 'underachievement'. These different ways of talking about, or 'constructing', male students' poor performance are treated as *interpretative repertoires*, an analytic concept referring to "culturally familiar and habitual lines of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes" (Wetherell, 1998: 400).

Linked to the work of Gilbert & Mulkay (1984), a focus on interpretative repertoires was introduced to social psychology by Potter and Wetherell (1987), who used this concept to refer to "a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events" (p.138). Since then, interpretative repertoires have been drawn upon as a fruitful means of examining the regularities, and flexibility, evident across accounts clustered within particular topic areas (Potter, 1996).

For the purpose of this thesis, a focus upon repertoires of accounting brings many potential insights to the analysis of descriptive, explanatory and evaluative representations of the boys' 'achievement crisis'. Firstly, this emphasis enables attention to be paid to the linguistic and argumentative practices comprising the 'tool kit of resources' available for use in discussion of this issue. As Edley (2001) explains, interpretative repertoires are the 'building blocks' of conversation – shared

meaning-making formulations, provided by history, that are rehearsed selectively and *functionally* within specific conversational settings.

Secondly, the identification and analysis of interpretative repertoires enables a focus on the cultural history of masculinity (and of education) that is sedimented in these resources – resources that are repositories of the cultural ‘common sense’ that forms the basis of shared understanding (Edley & Wetherell, 1997). In turn, as Edley (2001) explains, this focus facilitates investigation of sense-making *limits* – what is possible to say about male and female learners and what, by implication, is not.

2.5.2 Ideological dilemmas

A second organizing feature of analysis in this thesis is that of *ideological dilemmas*, a concept introduced by Billig *et al.* (1988) in discussion of ‘lived ideologies’ – the cultural beliefs and practices that comprise a community’s ‘common sense’. Billig *et al.* argue that lived ideologies, far from being coherent and integrated, are characterized by inconsistency and fragmentation. That is, they explain that the meaning-making system we know as common sense consists of often contradictory arguments and principles, and is therefore inherently *dilemmatic* in nature. Billig *et al.* argue that competing common sense arguments may be mobilized on a single issue, leading to ideological dilemmas where they come into conflict. They contend that such dilemmas are part and parcel of social interaction, holding that common sense is *normally organized* through contrary themes, such that tension between contradictory positions is a central feature of everyday arguing and thinking.

Edley (2001) explains that there are clear points of overlap between ideological dilemmas and the interpretative repertoires that represent available patterns of ‘common sense’ accounting. He argues that the notion of ideological dilemmas suggests that there may be different interpretative repertoires with which we may account for the same social object – repertoires constructed relationally within an “unfolding, historical, argumentative exchange” (p.204). In this sense, the identification of ideological dilemmas allows investigation into the *rhetorical* nature of explanatory and descriptive patterns of accounting: their argumentative limits and persuasive flexibility. Indeed, as Edley argues, identifying the structuring effects of competing themes highlights the space available for dissent and debate: “it is the productive tensions that exists between different ideological themes which prompts conversation itself” (p.204).

In this thesis, the identification of ideological dilemmas within accounts of male under/achievement highlights the contradictory discursive framework through which witnesses constructed representations of ‘what it is to be a boy in school’. It will be shown that the simultaneous problematization and valorization of ‘boyiness’ within these accounts reflects a *series* of dilemmas between the maintenance of appropriate schoolboy masculinities and successful academic engagement. Ultimately, it will be argued that these dilemmas are indicative of a central tension between dominant ‘masculine ways of being’ and educational success, the reproduction of which may work to perpetuate boys’ underachievement ‘problem’.

2.5.3 Subject positions

As explained above, a central focus of this thesis is on the ways of being made available to male students within accounts simultaneously describing and defining ‘what it is to be a boy’. The identities offered by such accounts – the options through which male students might take up the role of ‘boy’ as constructed in this context – are referred to as *subject positions*.

As Edley (2001) explains, the concept of subject positions is central to discursive psychology, in that it connects broad sense-making patterns (e.g., interpretative repertoires, ideological dilemmas) to the social construction of selves. Edley defines subject positions as “‘locations’ within a conversation” (p. 210), where individuals are reconstituted as subjects in relation to relevant ways of speaking and writing about the world. In this sense, it can be seen that identities (like conversations) are shifting: as repertoires of accounting change within and across interactions, so do the subject positions offered within them.

Yet, identity is not understood as simply trailing in the wake of discourse, as people are also the *producers* of talk and of texts (Edley, 2001). Although subject positions are understood to constitute individuals within a structure of rights and obligations (Burr, 1995), this process is nonetheless held to be an occasioned social practice. As Wetherell (1998) explains, the taking up of identities – the accessibility, relevance and implications of the ‘positions’ made available – is always dependent upon surrounding conversational activities and performances.

2.6 Data: The House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys

The data examined in this thesis were produced in the context of hearings held as part of the Australian House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys. This Inquiry was initiated on 21 March 2000, when the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs requested the Employment, Education and Workplace Relations Committee to:

inquire into and report on the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools, particularly in relation to their literacy needs and socialization skills in the early and middle years of schooling; and
the strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors, those strategies which have been successful and scope for their broader implementation or increased effectiveness.
(House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002)

After the federal election in 2001, the name and membership of the Committee was changed to reflect a change in portfolio coverage. At the request of the Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Standing Committee on Education and Training readopted the inquiry on 21 March 2002.

In addition to receiving 231 written submissions from 202 parties, and conducting forums and/or inspections at 16 schools, the Committee held public hearings across all Australian states and territories. At the public hearings and school forums combined, 359 witnesses appeared and 1338 pages of evidence were recorded on the Hansard. Transcripts of these hearings (available for inspection from the Committee Office of the House of Representatives, the National Library of Australia or on the Inquiry website at:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/edt/eofb/index.htm>) comprise the corpus of materials analyzed in this thesis.

2.6.1 Discourse analysis and ‘appropriate’ data

In recent years, the field of discourse analysis has been characterized by considerable debate with regard to the sources of data deemed amenable to fruitful, and valid, discursive research. A shift has been evident from the analysis of conversational interviews (in which a researcher may encourage talk on specific themes) to a preference for ‘naturalistic data’ – talk that would have been produced even if it had not been recorded by the researcher (Potter, 2003). This section will outline the primary advantages and disadvantages of each of these forms of data. The aim of this summary is to argue that Hansard transcripts (as analyzed in this thesis) offer many of the analytic benefits of interviews, while at the same time providing advantages associated with ‘naturalistic’ materials.

Interviews, initially the most common means by which researchers sought to identify discursive patterns and practices, continue to be advocated as a research strategy on a number of related grounds. As Potter (2003) explains, interviews enable researchers to select their participants, and to facilitate talk directly relevant to their area of analytic concern. In this sense, interviews may be seen to allow a degree of ‘standardization’ difficult to achieve within naturalistic settings, and to facilitate ethical research that meets guidelines relevant, for example, to issues of informed consent.

Yet, interviews have increasingly been critiqued as a means of investigating everyday discursive practices (Silverman, 2001). It has been argued that interviews remove speakers from the interactional contexts in which they regularly participate, revealing more about how ‘interview talk’ gets done than about everyday accounting and meaning-making (Taylor, 2001a). Participants’ orientation to the interviewer’s authority, and to the themes they are called to discuss, is held to have an inevitable effect upon the talk produced – such that responses may be seen to be ‘about’ a research interaction as opposed to a ‘topic’ or ‘theme’ (Potter, 2003).

While some researchers argue that interaction effects within interview settings are interesting conversational features that might be usefully explored (e.g., Speer, 2002), others contend that they can, and therefore should, be avoided. Indeed, as Potter (2003) argues, acknowledgement of the occasioned and action-oriented nature of talk may be seen to *necessitate* an analytic focus on the situated interactions in which discursive accomplishments *naturally* occur.

Analysis of ‘naturalistic data’ – materials that exist apart from the researcher’s intervention – has been advocated as a means of addressing these concerns (Silverman, 2001). Potter (1997) outlines a range of benefits of such materials, focusing in particular on the notion that naturalistic data is “less affected by the formulations and assumptions of the researcher” (p.50). As Taylor (2001a) likewise explains, although it may be difficult to obtain naturalistic data on particular themes, materials of this kind enable interactional practices (as opposed to talk *about* them) to be the object of direct inquiry.

In light of each of the concerns outlined above, Hansard transcripts of public hearings (such as those analyzed in the present study) may be seen to provide an interesting and potentially fruitful analytic site, offering the benefits of interview data in a more naturalistic form.

2.6.2 Hansard transcripts as ‘naturalistic data’

Hearings held for the Inquiry into the Education of Boys followed a question-and-answer format, in which Committee members asked witnesses to discuss their understanding of issues currently faced by boys in schools. As such, these hearings may be seen to have been interview-like in that the Committee were able to standardize aspects of proceedings (asking certain questions of each witness), and to generate discussion within specific topic areas. The selection of witnesses was also in line with standard interview procedure, in that all those appearing before the Committee were ‘key informants’ – teachers, parents and providers of children’s services.

For the purpose of the current study, focused on constructions of the ‘problem’ of boys’ underachievement, each of these features offered analytic benefits. Transcripts of Inquiry proceedings provided a record of talk that directly addressed the topic of analytic concern. Further, they comprised accounts generated by individuals who did not speak in isolation from interactional stake management, nor from the material practice of instructional and/or service provision for boys.

Yet, unlike interview transcripts, Hansard data may be seen to be ‘naturalistic’. While witnesses to the Inquiry were removed from their everyday lives and

positioned as expert informants (a criticism that has been levelled at conversational interviews), this did not represent a circumstance ‘got up’ by a researcher for the sole purpose of generating analytic material. Transcripts of Inquiry proceedings do not reflect talk for talk’s sake – rather, they may be seen to record naturally occurring interactions produced with the ostensible aim, and material consequence, of informing educational practice and policy. In this sense, the Hansard materials analyzed in this thesis provide a direct record of the object of study – occasioned constructions of boys’ underachievement ‘problem’ – in which representational practices (rather than persons) could be taken as the focus of critical inquiry.

2.6.3 The issue of transcription in the analysis of Hansard data

In this thesis, transcripts from the Inquiry into Boys’ Education are analyzed *as they appear* on the public record. That is, rather than purchasing videos of Inquiry proceedings and transcribing them myself according to detailed (e.g., Jeffersonian) conventions, I analyze them in the form in which they were recorded, and published, on the Hansard. The rationale behind this choice was both pragmatic and epistemological, and will be outlined below.

Firstly, using data as recorded on the Hansard meant that it was practical to code and analyze the full set of transcripts of Inquiry proceedings. Given the size of this corpus, it would have been a particularly time-consuming and costly endeavour to transcribe the hearings from video according to more detailed conventions.

More importantly, it was decided that the inclusion of CA-style transcription notation would provide more detail than was necessary to support the analytic

approach of this thesis. As Taylor (2001a: 26) argues, a discursive analysis concerned with macro-discursive patterns (such as interpretative repertoires and subject positions) need only use a relatively broad transcription, recording the “words spoken by consecutive speakers but little further detail”. Given that this thesis adopts such a focus, it seems that inclusion of notations beyond those provided by Hansard would reduce the readability of transcripts, without offering material analytic benefit (see Riley, 2002). While some researchers (e.g., Kitzinger, 2000) argue for the significance of conversational features such as the “fine details of timing and intonation” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 166), the inclusion of these features within transcription implies that they are meaningful, and relevant, to the analysis at issue (Taylor, 2001a). I would argue that this is not the case for the present investigation, which aims to address the function and political consequences of representations of male underachievement.

A final justification for addressing Hansard data as they appear on the public record is that this approach provides another means by which I may limit my influence on the materials I subject to analysis. As Potter (2000) explains, transcription always involves a process of selection in which the researcher presents a written version of spoken interaction comprising features they deem to be relevant. Analyst-produced transcriptions may, therefore, never be neutral representations of talk. While I acknowledge that Hansard records also involve transcription selections and omissions, these choices may be seen as ‘naturally occurring’ – they are not driven by my own analytic agenda.

For each of these reasons, the data offered for analysis in this thesis are presented as they appear in the official Hansard record of Inquiry proceedings. All excerpts are labelled with the page number on which they appear within the transcript, and the location of the hearing in which they were produced.

CHAPTER 3

BOYS' UNDERACHIEVEMENT AS THE FAULT OF 'INADEQUATE TEACHERS'

3.1 Constructions of teacher responsibility within the boys' education debate: an overview

Concern about teacher effectiveness has been at the centre of debates about boys' education in Australia (Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Within restructured education systems influenced by a focus on 'performativity' (Lyotard, 1984) outcomes data abound, enabling the influence of teaching practice to be identified and assessed as potential 'causes' of male underachievement are investigated.

A focus on teacher competence was, likewise, clearly evident within the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys. This orientation, broadly outlined in the Inquiry's stated frame of reference ("to investigate the social, cultural and educational factors affecting the education of boys in Australian schools"), was made explicit at the hearings in the form of Committee Member Rod Sawford's recurrent question to witnesses: "Have we forgotten how to teach boys?"

Responses to Sawford's query invariably assented to the notion that high quality teaching was vital to efforts aimed at raising students' learning outcomes. Prominent in voicing this position was Dr Ken Rowe, Head of the Australian Council for Educational Research, whose written and verbal submissions were referenced widely throughout the Inquiry by Committee Members and witnesses alike. Rowe's central thesis, encapsulated in a supplementary submission to the

Inquiry (Rowe & Rowe, 2002: 1), held that differences in gendered attainment are “insignificant” when compared to “teacher effects”. Drawing upon findings from his large-scale review of performance outcomes, Rowe’s submission argued that the “quality of teaching and learning provision ... has the most significant impact upon students’ cognitive, affective and behavioural schooling outcomes” (p.1) above all other demographic factors including socio-economic status, minority group membership and, notably, gender.

It is interesting to observe that Rowe’s findings, although ostensibly highlighting the impact of teacher quality on the learning outcomes of *all* students, were re-packaged during the hearings in explicitly gender-comparative terms. Although Rowe’s findings were taken to demonstrate the need to focus on teacher effectiveness regardless of student sex, largely un-theorized extrapolations throughout the hearings positioned such data as evidence that boys *in particular* are affected by inadequate teaching, and that competent educational practice must take a gender-differentiated *form*. Indeed, in the Committee’s final report (House of Representatives, 2002), boys were depicted as being especially vulnerable to ineffective teachers (“While girls will more readily respond to content, boys respond more to their relationship with their teacher”, p.78) and as requiring qualitatively different methods of educational ‘best practice’ (“Boys need more explicit teaching than girls and tend to prefer more hands-on activities; structured programs are better for boys because they need to know what is expected of them and moreover, they like to be shown steps along the way to achieve success”, p.78).

The essentialist assumptions underpinning the above assertions have been a feature of mainstream accounts positioning teachers as responsible for the ‘underperformance of boys’ (Raphael Reed, 1998). Universalized constructions of boys’ ‘unmet needs’ and ‘overlooked abilities’ have been pervasive within scholarly literature surrounding the ‘boys problem’ (e.g., Lillico, 2000a, 2000b; West, 2000) and particularly dominant within more popular accounts (e.g., Gurian, 2000, 2002; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Pollack, 1998). In Australia, the work of Men’s Movement writer Steve Biddulph has had widespread currency in this regard; the focus on teacher accountability for male success bolstered by his widely disseminated claims that boys “learn teachers, not subjects”, and that educators must acknowledge the “brain differences, hormones, and the need for male role models” that impact upon male students’ prospects of academic success if schools “are to become good places for boys” (1997: 149).

In very broad terms, the dominant argument within accounts put forward by mainstream ‘boys’ advocates’ has been that ineffectual teachers have fostered an ‘anti-boy’ sentiment’ (Pollack, 1998) within educational settings, failing to respect or encourage boys’ unique natural aptitudes or to employ methods through which they might be brought to the fore. Such accounts have homogenized boys, arguing that male students’ high activity level and slow impulse control (Gurian, Henley & Trueman, 2001) have seen them pathologized by teachers, who have forced them to adhere to classroom conventions ‘at odds’ with their natural capacities (Young, 2001). To differing degrees, boys’ advocates have attributed this ‘victimization’ of male students to female teachers who “allegedly dominate the profession, create a feminized culture in the school, design curriculum for the female’s learning style,

and cater to and reward female patterns of behaviour” (Titus, 2004: 152). Feminist teachers have also been blamed for erroneously conflating boys’ ‘natural boisterousness’ and slower maturation with intellectual inability, the upshot of which is argued to have been boys’ over-representation in remedial classes and low ability groups (Sommers, 2000; Gurian, Henley & Trueman, 2001). By way of these arguments, and through the recitation of statistics outlining male students’ higher rates of suicide, truancy and behavioural problems (Yates, 1997), boys have been depicted as the ‘new disadvantaged’ (Lingard & Douglas 1999), and attention to their inherent learning needs has been advocated as part of a gender equity agenda (Hey *et al.*, 1998).

This analytic chapter will address the ways in which educators’ responsibility for boys’ underachievement was constructed in the context of the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys. Given this focus, it seems important to unpack the assumptions that underpin this ‘standard story’ of educators’ accountability, echoes of which were manifest throughout the Hansard transcripts. The introduction to this chapter will, firstly, address the performative culture of contemporary education systems, a product of which is the increasing pool of outcomes data from which the impact of ‘teacher competence’ has been identified as a target for reform. The focus will then turn to literature relating to the discourse of biology that underlies accounts that position teachers as having failed to identify and address boys’ inherent learning needs, to the academic detriment of all male students. Attention will next be paid to potential solutions to the ‘boys’ achievement problem’ made available by these explanatory frameworks, including the positioning of ‘boy friendly pedagogy’ and ‘the identification of boys’ needs’ as

priorities within the framework of classroom gender equity. Finally, the implications of these interventions will be interrogated as to the part they may play in 're-masculinizing' teaching, in disciplining (particularly female) educators, and in deflecting attention from the social construction of masculinity within educational contexts.

3.1.1 Educational restructuring and the boys debate: locating teacher accountability

Concern about 'failing boys' has been inextricably linked to concern about 'failing schools' (Epstein *et al.*, 1998). The restructuring of education systems on the basis of neo-liberal economic theories that emphasize improved effectiveness, efficiency and performance indicators as evidence of policy goals has given rise to the proliferation of outcomes data that have enabled 'underperforming boys' to be isolated as a specific target for reform. This movement, characterized in the UK and Canada by an emphasis on 'school improvement', has manifested in Australia and New Zealand as a shift towards 'standards-based' education (Spencer, 2001). The constant measurement of outcomes that is central to this approach has been justified as a means of improving performance through increased accountability and competition within and between schools (Lauder *et al.*, 1999). Here, with a focus on high educational standards as a means of strengthening Australia's competitiveness within a global economy, the underachievement of boys has been positioned as having educational, as well as broader economic, ramifications (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Although economic rationalist modes of school restructuring have also enabled investigation into the educational impact of demographic factors such as socio-economic status and race, the characteristics of the 'failing school' have been inescapably gendered (Raphael Reed, 1999). 'Unacceptable educational standards' have been evidenced by features such as low levels of literacy and high levels of problem behaviour, exclusion and truancy – features closely associated with the underachievement of male students (Yates, 1997). Indeed, as Raphael Reed (1998) argues, the gendered nature of the 'failing school' has seen the complicated nexus of academic attainment and social inequality reduced to an account locating the solution to falling standards within improved strategies for educating boys. Through such a focus, she argues, attention is deflected from structural and cultural contributors to 'underachievement' towards a condemnation of teacher (and school) 'ineffectiveness'.

The focus on teachers' accountability for the maintenance of achievement outcomes has become a feature of modern, 'marketized' schools, where institutional performance demands have been devolved down the line to be met by individual educators (Lingard and Douglas, 1999). It has been argued that such restructuring has re-affirmed the gender segmentation of schools as institutions in that (predominantly male) educational leaders have intervened to reconstitute the practical and emotional labour required of (predominantly female) teachers (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). In the context of raising the standards of boys, this re-gendering has been both implicit and explicit in form; revised outcomes-oriented appraisal systems are argued to have become 'masculinist' and entrepreneurial in style, and to

have particularly targeted teachers of humanities subjects (in which boys' performance is lowest), the majority of whom are women (Apple, 1996).

Whereas, in the 1970s and 80s, ideas about teacher development centred around concepts of human motivation and 'top down support for bottom up change', notions of teacher professionalism have been largely replaced by this focus on teacher accountability (Kenway *et al.*, 1997). The shift towards performance measures and the surveillance of outcomes has seen teachers enter a relationship of confessional, self-regulation with policy makers that Kenway (1997) argues works to "infantilise teachers and imply they do not understand, cannot be trusted, must be shamed into good practice and will be blamed if change does not occur" (p.335).

The accountability framework positions educators as both professionally and morally responsible for student attainment, and for engaging with practices of pedagogic reform that result in outcomes amenable to further surveillance and consonant with the 'standards focus' of restructured educational systems (Raphael Reed, 1999). This shift has been seen to encourage a return to 'thin', transmission-oriented pedagogies (Blackmore, 1997) argued to narrow the (liberal) goals of schooling. In line with the notion that the performativity focus of schooling represents a 'remasculinization' of education (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2001), such methods have been associated with 'male teaching styles' and have been advocated as effective means of raising the achievement of boys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Methods prioritizing individual student needs (to which many female teachers remain committed) have been reframed within the managerialist framework

to focus upon the needs of ‘target groups’, of which boys have become the most salient example (Raphael Reed, 1999).

Indeed, it seems the performance culture of contemporary school systems that has enabled and justified a focus on boys’ underachievement has, in many ways, begun to determine potential solutions to this ‘problem’. As teachers have increasingly been held professionally (and morally) accountable for raising outcomes standards, they have likewise been expected to identify and address the ‘causes’ of underachievement. In the case of boys, this has manifested in the expectation that educators understand the basis of boys’ specific ‘learning styles’ (variably conceptualized as resulting from biological predispositions and social expectations), and to adjust their practice in order that this orientation might be more effectively accommodated (Titus, 2004).

3.1.2 Biology, hormones and socialization: unpacking mainstream accounts of boys’ ‘inherent learning needs’

Many in-service and research-based teacher training programs addressing the achievement of male students are grounded in normalizing and homogenized constructions of boys’ ‘inherent’ learning needs (Martino, Lingard & Mills, 2004). Of these, a large proportion draws upon theories of innate gender differences based in cognitive psychology (Raphael Reed, 1999). Once equipped with information as to the ‘basis’ of gendered predispositions, teachers are expected to manage their classrooms in such a manner that will accommodate these preferences - although discussion of educators’ attitudes to such approaches, and of their impact on male *and* female students, remains largely absent from this process (Skelton, 2001).

The notion that explanatory accounts of inherent gender differences impact on the ways in which pedagogies become, correspondingly, “modified to reinforce particular gendered expectations and orientations to learning” (Martino *et al.*, 2004: 436), highlights the importance of critical investigation into the central assumptions of these frameworks.

In general terms, once again, many proponents of a biological basis underlying differential gendered achievement have argued that such discrepancies reflect structural and functional differences between male and female brains (e.g., Moir & Jessel, 1991; Blum, 1999; Hanan 1996). In particular, the finding that females tend to have a larger and more vascularized corpus callosum (cc) has been highlighted, and taken to explain boys’ greater visual-spatial, and girls’ greater verbal, abilities. This argument holds that the cc connects the right brain (where emotions are said to be housed) to the left brain (where the ability to express emotion is taken to be located). A thicker cc is argued to result in more connectivity and brain lateralization between the hemispheres, explaining females’ ability to use a variety of brain parts to perform a single task, and their pre-disposition for high linguistic, auditory and fine motor ability. Conversely, a smaller cc is taken to suggest a restricted informational flow, and more specialization of hemispheric capacity, explaining males’ higher skill level on spatial tasks (Begley & Murr, 1995).

These structural and operational brain differences (often argued to result from the effect of sex-specific hormone levels, c.f. Sommers, 2000; Kleinfeld, 1998) are argued to be ‘hard-wired’, and to determine the specific learning styles of male versus female students (Sommers, 2000). The notion that the male brain is better

equipped for speculative thinking and action than for reflective and emotion-centred tasks has served to support the argument that boys are ‘disadvantaged’ within mainstream classrooms that favour a language-rich approach to learning (Raphael Reed, 1999). The observed trend for boys to outperform girls in maths and science and for girls to achieve high-level literacy is also explained within this framework: the reflection required within humanities suits girls’ left-hemisphere strength, and the sequential, organized nature of science study matches boys’ right-hemisphere strengths in terms of spatial and analytical abilities (Sommers, 2000).

Essentialist accounts of this kind, based in notions of biological determinism, have been interrogated by critical educationalists in terms of their function in framing the ‘nature’ of boys’ underachievement and potential solutions to this ‘problem’ (Titus, 2004). In particular, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) have called for examination of the relationship between diagnoses of need and curricular/pedagogical responses, given that such diagnoses rely on an un-theorized step from biological differences to unverified conceptualizations of ‘male behaviour’.

In their critique of brain sex research (focused particularly of the work of Moir & Jessel, 1991), Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue that evidence as to gendered differences in brain structure and function is more equivocal than has been acknowledged within mainstream accounts. They explain that studies isolating gender differences in brain size have been based upon small samples and have yielded conflicting results: some aspects of brain anatomy have been larger in females and others in males; some studies have found no significant difference (e.g., Tavris, 1992). Even the gendered impact of the corpus callosum, held to be the

primary structural feature distinguishing male and female brains and resultant abilities, has been contested. Gilbert and Gilbert review evidence indicating that the absolute size of the cc is similar for males and females, suggesting correspondingly similar levels of hemispheric connectivity. Further, following Kimura (1992), they argue that accounts attributing gendered performance differentials to the structural make-up of male and female brains assume that cognitive functions are discrete and inflexible – a notion undermined by findings that a single function can be performed by different parts of the brain at different times.

Evidence as to the plastic and interactive nature of the brain has also served to shed doubt upon the relationship between hormones and cognitive ability, particularly the widely popularized notion that differing levels of testosterone (linked to cognitive performance on visual-spatial tests) cause gendered discrepancies in mathematical performance (e.g., Moir & Jessel, 1991). Again citing Kimura (1992), Gilbert and Gilbert present research suggesting that the impact of testosterone is not straightforward. Kimura's findings indicate that, although females measured as having high testosterone score more highly on tests of spatial ability than those with low testosterone, this pattern is reversed for men: males with low testosterone levels have superior spatial ability scores than those whose testosterone levels are high. In light of results of this kind, and evidence that an effect of testosterone on the developing brain has been found only in species *other than* primates and humans, the privileged explanatory status of biological accounts has been increasingly undermined. For example, as Halpern (1997) has argued, even if differential mathematics performance can be attributed to structural brain differences, the source of this divergence could just as plausibly be located in early learning

experiences as in 'hormonal variations'. Socialization theories have thus been incorporated into explanatory accounts of achievement differentials. For example, Wilder and Powell's (1989) review holds that parental expectations differ for children of each gender, and are reflected in the opportunities for play parents provide for their children and the ways in which they respond to their behaviours. Wilder and Powell argue that children's early engagement with gender-specific activities shapes their interests (which diverge further with age), such that children develop gendered modes of interacting with the world that, in turn, shape the what and how they learn.

Gilbert and Gilbert (1994: 44) conclude that patterns of academic differentiation between male and female students can be seen to reflect

a complex interaction of biological potential, developmental experience and social context, where biological sex is only one of a huge number of possible influencing factors.

Such a multifaceted picture of school performance appears to be affirmed when attention turns to an appraisal of actual disparities in gendered ability. Indeed, while research into sex differences in intellectual abilities continues to demonstrate female superiority on verbal tasks and male superiority in tests of mathematical reasoning, such findings remain controversial; these differences are small, their source is unclear, and they have been found to vary in relation to the measures and samples used (Murphy & Elwood, 1998). As Segal (1990) explains, the most consistent result across studies of this kind is that similarities in males' and females' performance far outweigh any differences between them. This finding is significant, the variability with regard to performance *within* gender groups suggesting the need

for a research focus upon intra-gender variation rather than that observed between the sexes.

Yet, to a large degree, popular and professional literature addressing concern about the achievement of boys positions the ‘underperformance’ of this (undifferentiated) group as the result of curriculum and pedagogy that fails to accommodate boys’ ‘inherent’ gendered needs and capacities (Raphael Reed, 1998). Warrant theories about natural aptitudes and preferences have served to justify the provision of boy-friendly pedagogy (to remedy the adverse effects of teaching models foregrounding co-operative and literacy-rich learning) and to determine the form such interventions should take (a return to teacher-centred, back-to-basics methods held to suit boys’ innate learning style) (Titus, 2004). Grounded in largely biological, essentialist accounts, removing gendered achievement differentials from their social and political location, boys’ advocates have called for the provision of designated resources and teaching methods for boys as a priority within the framework of ‘gender equity’ (Hey *et al.*, 1998). The consequences of such accounts, and the interventions they have served to justify, will be addressed below.

3.1.3 The construction of disadvantage: boys and ‘special needs’ provision

Accounts of boys’ underachievement as the result of teaching ‘skewed against’ their inherent capacities have given rise to claims that the institution of ‘boy-friendly pedagogy’ is required as a means of restoring gender equity (Hey *et al.*, 1998). On the grounds that contemporary co-operative and language-rich teaching methods have adversely affected male students, boys’ advocates have argued that designated programs and practices are a necessary means of righting male students’ current

'disadvantage' (Smith, 1995). As Raphael Reed (1999) explains, such arguments work to ascribe boys 'special educational needs' on the basis of their sex alone, an attribution that functions to increase male students' visibility, and claims to resources, while suggesting that girls no longer require educational support. These accounts absent discussion about gender inequality as a social phenomenon, redefining the issue in terms of the within-school politics of 'educational opportunity' (Hey *et al.*, 1998).

Feminist educationalists have critiqued the construction of boys' 'special needs' on a number of related grounds. Most broadly, they have argued that accounts advocating help for boys on the basis that they are now underachieving must be read in light of the fact that male students have *always* received more resources than their female peers (Hey *et al.*, 1998). Studies have found that educators routinely devote more time and attention to boys than to girls (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Spender 1982), a pattern reproduced by gendered differences in behaviour. It has been found that boys' tendency to be disruptive has seen them occupy a greater proportion of classroom 'air time' and teachers' consideration than girls, who tend to demand and receive less attention (French & French, 1993; French, 1985). The disproportionate attention received by boys has not been limited to cases of misconduct; it has been found that, in general, boys receive more instructional contacts, more academic criticism and praise, and more sophisticated questions than female students (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Kelly, 1988).

In their broad-scale UK case study into the construction of special educational needs, Hey, *et al.* (1998) found that gendered behaviour patterns, and the focusing

of educational support in the areas of behaviour management and remedial literacy, combine to position boys as the primary recipients of educational resources. In their study, whereas boys were happy to ask for help from girls, and girls routinely helped both male and female peers, boys did not approach each other for assistance. Competition between boys for teacher attention was rife, and when it was not provided, boys tended to respond by behaving disruptively. Hey *et al.* argue that this situation represents a complex interaction of educational and gendered expectations that has a profound, but often unacknowledged, effect on resource allocation. They explain that boys' construction of learning as a feminine pursuit, coupled with an educational orientation to learning support that foregrounds behaviour and literacy, has for some time produced an allocation of resources weighted towards provision for boys. As such, it has been argued that increasing expenditure on specialized 'boys' programs' would represent an intensification of boys' disproportionate access to resources given that existing and well-funded remedial programs, although not set up explicitly for boys, are nonetheless already dominated by them (Kenway *et al.*, 1997).

3.1.4 Redressing educational 'feminization': male role models and the 'remasculinization' of pedagogy

Advocates of boy-friendly practice and programs have also positioned the recent 'feminization of education' as grounds for prioritizing the needs of male students on the equity agenda (Skelton 2002). The notion that education systems have been feminized (a claim that will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter) has been based in the claim that female educators dominate the teaching profession, and have shaped their methods in such a way that girls are set up to succeed and boys to fail (Browne & Fletcher, 1995). Such accounts are often linked to the

constructions of innate gendered learning styles previously discussed, and the notion that those of female students are being 'met' by contemporary feminized classroom practices while those of boys are effectively 'ignored'.

Two primary modes of redressing the feminized nature of modern classroom contexts have been advocated. The first of these has been the call for more male teachers, promoted as a solution to female educators' 'favouring' of girls' behaviours and preferred styles of learning, and as an opportunity for boys to model themselves on men rather than 'in opposition' to women (Lingard & Douglas 1999).

Critical educationalists have argued that, although a balance of men and women in the teaching profession may be ideal, the valorization of male teachers as role models risks denigrating female educators and reinforcing dominant ways of being male (Martino *et al.*, 2004). It has been argued that calls for more male teachers may, at their worst, work to blame female teachers for boys' underperformance, deflecting attention away from the ways in which women may already be seen to bear the brunt of inequities within their profession (e.g., the disproportionate representation of men on the staff of educational executives - Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Even where strategies involving male mentors are advocated as a productive means of encouraging students to challenge gender stereotypes, a tension is evident as Skelton (2002) explains:

If male teachers are needed because they are able to model traditional masculine characteristics then how will they simultaneously be able to provide boys with alternative, more compliant, and therefore less 'cool' forms of masculinity? (p. 92).

Working in conjunction with appeals for more male teaching staff has been the call for a return to the more didactic, transmission-oriented teaching methods that are held to suit boys' learning preferences. Promoters of such a shift argue that boys are disadvantaged by contemporary child-centred, co-operative teaching strategies, and advocate the implementation of structured, teacher-centred practices emphasizing individualized work and competition as a means of addressing this 'inequity' (e.g., Sommers, 2001; Kleinfeld, 1998).

In a UK study addressing the educational impact of such didactic teaching methods, Boaler (1997a; 1997b) found a more complex pattern of gendered responses than is generally acknowledged within boys advocates' appeals for a return to 'structured methods'. In the particular context of mathematics learning, Boaler found that girls were more likely than boys to switch off when teaching was driven by rules and procedures, and to experience anxiety in competitive and fast-paced lessons. This pattern has been noted elsewhere (Kenway *et al.*, 1997; Yates, 1997), and has been taken to signal the negative implications for girls of 'boy-friendly' pedagogy.

Yet the very 'boy-friendliness' of traditional, highly structured teaching was also thrown into question by Boaler's study. Her results indicated that other groups of students adversely affected by strictly didactic methods *included* boys – these strategies were found to disadvantage working-class students, students from minority ethnic backgrounds and students deemed highly able (see also Hatcher, 1997).

The lack of evidence that ‘traditional’ methods improve overall achievement (Slavin, 1996), and the challenging of claims that teacher-focused approaches are any more congenial to boys than those that are student-centred (Boaler, 1998) have been used to undermine appeals for boy-oriented pedagogical reform. Indeed, it has been claimed that the implementation of ‘boy-friendly’ changes to teaching would *adversely* affect male students, whose social development often lacks opportunities for the acquisition of skills in empathy and communication – skills currently emphasized within progressive pedagogies (McLean, 1996).

In spite of these concerns, transmission-style teaching continues to be advocated as a means of raising boys’ achievement. In response, critical educators have argued that the notion of ‘boy-friendly pedagogy’ is based upon normalizing assumptions about male students that marginalize poor, ethnic and gay members of this group (Anderson & Accomando, 2002), and that boy-oriented strategies must be critiqued for their role in reproducing/legitimizing the very versions of masculinity they seek to ‘address’ (see Davies, 1995).

Critics have also highlighted the way in which the gendered (and raced and classed) effects of ‘back to basics teaching’ have been obscured within accounts justifying this shift, not as a ‘boy-friendly’ strategy, but as a means of ‘raising educational standards’. For example, Raphael Reed (1999) argues that calls for transmission-style teaching (on the grounds that such methods fit with the outcome-oriented performance culture of modern schools) represent a ‘re-masculinization’ of pedagogy legitimated through concern about standards. Ultimately she argues that, whether explicitly or implicitly provided for male students, the implementation of

teacher-centred and benchmark-oriented practice signals a perspective on pedagogy that is apolitical, asocial and that may be used “to discipline teachers – particularly female teachers – for their failure to meet boys’ needs” (p.103).

3.1.5 Constructions of educators’ responsibility for boys’ underachievement: a critical, discursive approach

In broad terms, the arguments outlined so far arise in the context of debate as to the ‘truth’, ‘accuracy’ and ‘fairness’ of accounts positioning teachers as responsible for the underachievement of boys. The analysis that follows aims to set aside questions as to the ‘reality’ of these claims, and turn attention to the discursive practices that enable *versions* of teacher accountability to be persuasively established. This approach takes the construction of educators’ culpability for boys’ poor performance, not as a necessary interpretation of objective data, but as a discursive formulation that has ideological and material effects. These constructions will therefore be interrogated with regard to the ways in which they are produced by, and serve to reproduce, dominant assumptions about gender, education and the teacher’s role.

At one level, the analysis will address the socio-historical and political “conditions of possibility” (Janks, 1997) that enable the influence of educators to be made relevant to discussion about boys’ failure. That is, attention will be paid to the constructions of teachers as accountable for raising students’ achievement and meeting their ‘learning needs’ – accounts drawing, respectively, on dominant notions of educational surveillance and gendered capacity.

In addition, the analytic focus will turn toward the broader ideological function of accounts establishing the *nature* of the ‘boys’ achievement problem’ at the very moment they seek to address it. The consequences of accounts formulating concern about achievement as an issue *of* boys and *for* teachers will be addressed, and a focus on the positioning of both boys and teachers within this explanatory framework will be provided.

3.1.6 Framing the analysis: Cohen’s historical perspective

The importance of discursive analysis in addressing claims of educators’ accountability for boys’ failure seems to be particularly well justified by the work of Michele Cohen (1998). Her historical analysis shows that, whereas girls’ underachievement has generally been attributed to (internal) deficits in ability, the poor performance of boys has invariably been depicted as an (external) problem of teachers and methods. Cohen argues that this attribution, grounded in assumptions of boys’ inherent and inflexible ‘needs’ and ‘abilities’, has served to position pedagogy as a primary means of improving boys’ achievement, as it follows that if we can’t change boys, we must change the way we teach them.

In the context of the current ‘boys crisis’, Cohen argues that a re-articulation of accounts linking boys’ failure to inadequate teaching has implications for both male and female students. She explains that, for girls, the justification this construction provides for the implementation of ‘boy-friendly’ practices could signal a return to the traditional, didactic teaching methods by which they have been traditionally excluded (an argument presented above). Such an account fails to address the broader systems of gender inequality in which schooling is situated, allowing

practices that serve to reinforce hegemonic masculinity to be presented as ‘needs-based equity interventions’. For boys, Cohen argues, constructions externalizing responsibility for their poor performance may prevent their failure from being meaningfully addressed. As long as teachers (rather than boys) are to blame, the potentially problematic aspects of (hegemonic) ‘boyiness’ implicated in male students’ alienation from schooling will not be challenged, but accommodated.

Following Cohen, the analysis to follow will focus upon the strategies through which responsibility for boys’ underachievement was attributed to teachers in the context of the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry. Four pervasive interpretative repertoires were identified in this regard, and will be analyzed in detail. Each of these repertoires will be shown to construct teachers as able to ‘make or break’ the achievement of their male students, depending on the extent to which they provide the necessary conditions for the manifestation of boys’ ‘potential’.

At a broad level, analysis of the repertoires identified will focus on the ways in which responsibility for the underachievement of male students was attributed almost exclusively to teachers, while the responsibility of boys themselves was consistently downplayed. More specifically, attention will focus upon the naturalization of boys’ essential ‘needs’ and ‘learning styles’ that was central to these accounts. It will be shown that the (often circular) arguments constructing boys’ qualities as ‘unchangeable’ positioned the flexibility of teachers as the only available avenue for improving boys’ rates of success.

The link between ‘poor teaching’ and boys’ ‘underperformance’ made identity management a potentially problematic issue for the large number of witnesses to the Inquiry who were educators themselves. For this reason, the local negotiation of individual teacher accountability within repertoires of teacher input as ‘crucial’ will also be addressed.

Ultimately, it will be argued that the construction of teachers as the primary impediment to boys’ achievement functioned to protect and reify the notion of boys’ inherent ability. When this ability was established, the provision of conditions necessary for its ‘manifestation’ were positioned as a ‘moral requirement’, and ‘failing teachers’ could be held responsible for the existence of ‘failing boys’.

3.2 Teachers as the ‘critical factor’ with regard to boys’ achievement

Witnesses to the inquiry pervasively mobilized a repertoire that positioned teachers as the ‘critical factor’ with regard to boys’ achievement. In accounts of this kind, male students were positioned as passive within the learning process, while active and appropriate teacher input was constructed as the key to their success. Within a repertoire of teachers as ‘critical’, boys were depicted as ‘blameless’, their failure linked retrospectively to their teachers’ inadequate efforts.

3.2.1 ‘The teacher makes the difference’

Extracts 1 and 2, to follow, are presented for detailed analysis. These accounts are characteristic of those establishing a direct relationship between quality teaching methods and male students’ achievement at school. In explanations of this kind, the influence of good teaching was prioritized above all other factors in accounting for

specific observed instances where boys' results were shown to have improved. The use of anecdotal evidence to support the notion that teachers *can* facilitate boys' achievement served, typically, to present this outcome as one for which all educators *should* be held responsible.

In Extract 1, Senator Sawford (Inquiry Committee Member and trained teacher) draws upon a repertoire of teacher input as 'critical' to male students' success. In this extract, located within discussion about the impact of social advantage on academic achievement, Sawford relates observations drawn from school visits held at the outset of the Committee's Inquiry.

Extract 1

Mr SAWFORD—We go to a school in Sydney. Basically four years ago they diagnosed the kids in terms of literacy and numeracy attainments. Two-thirds of the problems are boys, a third girls. Again there is a program that is structured, that is active, that is monitored and that has additional adults involved. After four years it succeeds and there is basically no difference between girls and boys who have been diagnosed as having problems. All right, we have substance abuse, we have low socio-economic areas, we have an increase of 300 per cent in terms of marriage breakups and all the rest of it. But, notwithstanding any of that, it happened. I am a teacher too. When teachers talk to me about those things, I say, 'You're talking excuses,' because schooling can make a difference. It does not matter where they are, in low socio-economic areas or middleclass areas. Successful teachers change the differentials by their programs.

(Evanston, S.A. 815)

In Extract 1, a portrayal of educators as responsible for boys' achievement is accomplished via the reporting of a particular, observed account of effective teacher input demonstrably linked to improved male performance. The narrative structure of the extract establishes a causal account in which teachers' responsibility is

unequivocal: a Sydney school's 'successful' outcome ("basically no differences between girls and boys") is depicted as resulting directly from the provision of a "structured", "monitored" program that has "additional adults involved". Further, the 'scripted' nature (Edwards, 1994) of Sawford's story constructs his anecdote as typical of a broader pattern. That is, by opening his account with the phrase "we go to a school in Sydney", Sawford positions his story as a generic example of a wider phenomenon, the implication being that a pattern evident at a randomly selected school would, in all likelihood, be replicated in similar contexts. In turn, Sawford's specific example stands as evidence for the broader claim that schooling (i.e. teacher 'diagnosis' and 'intervention') can "make a difference" to boys' achievement. The agency of male (or, indeed, female) students is entirely absented, and boys are positioned as 'blameless' within an account of academic success as dependent upon factors beyond their control.

A common feature of accounts depicting educators as 'critical' to boys' success was the contrasting presentation of teachers' impact on achievement, and that produced by alternative (socio-political) factors. In Extract 1, Sawford develops a two-sided argument (Abell & Stokoe, 1999) that allows him to build a case prioritizing the influence of teachers over the impact of social and economic factors from an apparently 'knowledgeable' and 'balanced' position. His list of significant non-teacher factors is presented as a four-part concession ("All right, we have substance abuse, we have low socio-economic areas, we have an increase of 300 per cent in terms of marriage breakups and all the rest of it") enabling his eventual bottom-line argument ("notwithstanding any of that...schooling can make a difference") to be

portrayed as a reasonable conclusion based on a careful appraisal of relevant evidence.

In Extract 1, an acknowledgement of potential socio-economic explanations for boys' underachievement ultimately enables teachers' input to be constructed as the critical factor with regard to boys' success. The influence of "substance abuse", "low" socio-economic status and "marriage breakdowns" is downplayed, not simply as a result of the dismissive nature of Sawford's list-closing generalization ("and all the rest of it"), but through the presentation of these factors as 'insignificant' when compared with teacher effects ("It does not matter where they are, in low socio-economic areas or middleclass areas. Successful teachers change the differentials by their programs").

The speaker's identity position as a former educator also works in this extract to reinforce teachers' responsibility for boys' underperformance. Sawford's explicit membership identification ("I am a teacher too") places him within a category of people entitled to specialist, inside knowledge of the issue at hand (Potter, 1996). As such, his claim that teachers who link boys' underachievement to social and economic factors are "making excuses" becomes a credible accusation (as a teacher 'he should know'). The significance of socio-economic factors is further diminished through the presentation of these issues as being invoked by teachers who are motivated simply to protect themselves from blame.

The repertoire of teachers as 'critical' may be seen, then, to have significant implications with regard to the negotiation of teachers' personal accountability.

Within this repertoire boys were implicitly positioned as blameless, while teachers were explicitly held responsible for their underperformance. For educators, recourse to arguments highlighting the impact of alternative factors on patterns of attainment was typically construed as ‘motivated’ and consequently undermined, adding further weight to constructions of teacher input as the factor that ultimately ‘makes the difference’ to boys’ educational achievement.

The repertoire of educators as ‘critical’ to boys’ success is also demonstrated in Extract 2. In this excerpt, teachers’ practice is constructed as having a stronger impact on boys’ results than other social and classroom variables. Here, personal accountability is managed through the presentation of Queensland teacher Mr Townsend’s own practice as having been critically *beneficial* to the male students in his care.

Extract 2 follows a question from the Committee as to whether the improvement in boys’ results observed at the witness’s school could be attributed to the gender of the teachers involved or the school’s recent introduction of single-sex classes.

Extract 2

Mr Townsend—As the class teacher, I think it is irrelevant whether it is a male teacher or a female teacher. One of the other things we did was look at the parents— the parent or families—that the children came from. In the boys class only about eight of them came from single-parent families; in the girls class there were about 19. So we were thinking that maybe I should be taking the girls class, and maybe the female teacher should have been taking the boys class, because the girls did not have a male role model at home. Your original question was basically asking: how can we judge whether a boys-only class is what made these improvements? I very much doubt that the boys being in a class by themselves made the changes. I think it was a change in my attitude, in my teaching strategies and

in my expectations of what I did allow them to do, behaviour-wise,
and the activities that I structured for them.

(*Tallebudgera, Qld 1240*)

As in Extract 1, the repertoire of the teachers' impact as being of 'critical importance' works in Extract 2 to position individual educators as ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the boys in their classrooms. The effect of teacher gender is constructed as "irrelevant" to shifting patterns of attainment, and alternative contributors to boys' improvements are dismissed ("I very much doubt that the boys being in a class by themselves made the changes"), as the speaker presents himself as solely responsible for his students' heightened rates of success. A detailed four-part list depicts Townsend's input as intensive and causally linked to the improved achievement of his male students ("it was a change in my attitude, in my teaching strategies and in my expectations of what I did allow them to do, behaviour-wise, and the activities that I structured for them"). No mention is made of the active efforts of boys themselves in relation to the performance improvements being discussed in this exchange. Boys' agency is invisible within an account that unequivocally locates the catalyst for their success *within* their teacher. For example, boys, by definition, are not responsible for the "attitudes" of those who teach them.

The depiction of his own practice as having led to boys' achievement allows Townsend to present himself in a positive light as a dynamic and informed educator. He portrays himself as active; the claim that his boys improved as a result of his "strategies" implies that his techniques represented well-considered choices. Likewise, reference to the activities he has "structured" connotes tasks designed specifically to garner results. This account builds Townsend a positive identity

position, yet also serves to depict boys and their achievement as something that is simply ‘impacted *upon*’. Boys’ own actions and behaviours are read purely in the context of the limits set by their teacher (Townsend argues that his boys’ improvements related simply to changes in what he “did allow them to do”).

3.2.2 ‘Bad teaching leads to bad results’

The construction of educators as ‘making the difference’ to boys’ achievement worked, in the previous two extracts, to build a positive picture of teachers as responsible for their students’ success. Yet it may be seen that the reproduction of the repertoire of teachers’ input as ‘critical’ potentially supports a less complimentary positioning for educators when their students ‘underachieve’. In the section to follow, analysis will turn to examples in which constructions of teacher influence as paramount served to position educators as responsible, and therefore blameworthy, when their male students fail.

Extract 3 is an example of the kind of account in which the construction of teachers as able to ‘make or break’ their students’ achievement served to link boys’ underperformance to their teachers’ shortcomings. In this extract, the repertoire of teachers as ‘critical’ to boys’ success (or failure) is drawn upon by a senior school headmaster (in conversation with Committee Member Mr Wilkie) as he accounts for differences in boys’ results across different classroom settings.

Extract 3

Mr Wilkie—I have a query about the English class, the same sex English class. I am just wondering if you analyzed whether it was successful because the boys were together or whether it was successful because the teacher was fantastic. From what the boys

said, they really got on and did it well because they really liked the teacher. We have had a lot of evidence that suggests that where boys tend to get on very well with the teacher they do tend to perform, whereas for girls it is probably not the case to the same extent.

Mr Philp—We were lucky that Jackie was a pretty dynamic teacher. At the same time, after her first three weeks of that class she was pulling her hair out because it was very different; she earned their respect. As they started to be more interactive in the type of activities they were doing, I think that was of benefit, but Jackie was a good teacher. I think that is part of the issue, too. I wrote some things down here about what I think we need to look at, and one of the things I wrote down was to develop appropriate teaching methodologies for boys, because I think many teachers do not know how to communicate with boys.

(Evanston, S.A. 812)

The notion that teacher quality is the primary defining factor contributing to boys' achievement is made clear in Extract 3. The prioritization of educators' input over other influences on boys' success is explicit in Committee Member Wilkie's question ("From what the boys said, they really got on and did it well because they really liked the teacher"), making it potentially problematic for Philp to provide an alternative, contradictory account. Rather than position his response as at odds with "a lot of evidence" already heard by the Committee, Philp also constructs teacher input as being of primary significance, relegating the impact of "interactive activities" on boys' learning to the status of a secondary concern ("As they started to be more interactive in the type of activities they were doing, I think that was of benefit, but Jackie was a good teacher").

As was the case in the previous extracts, the construction of teachers' input as the key to boys' success works here to position boys as reactive, rather than agentic, with regard to their learning. The teacher in question is depicted as having been active in terms of both manner and method ("Jackie was a pretty dynamic

teacher...she earned their respect”), and the contrastingly passive presentation of her students positions them as simply responsive to her interventions (“from what the boys said, they really got on and did it well because they really liked the teacher”).

In Extract 3, the unproblematized link between effective teaching (“the teacher was fantastic”) and the achievement of boys supports the corresponding notion that when boys underachieve, such an outcome may also be attributable to teacher effects. A generalized picture of boys’ underachievement as resulting from inadequate teacher input is accomplished here through the presentation of Jackie’s success as the ‘exception that proves the rule’. While her specific practice is constructed as effective, it is contrasted with that of the majority of teachers whose methodologies are not ‘up to scratch’ (“I think we need to look at...develop[ing] appropriate teaching methodologies for boys because I think many teachers do not know how to communicate with boys”). This comparison manages a positive identity for the teacher in question (she is a cut above the majority of her colleagues; Philp was “lucky” to have her on staff) and, more importantly, it reinforces the definitive impact of teaching practice on boys’ academic success. The specific, and unusual, results observed in Jackie’s classroom are constructed as resulting from her singular skills, and the widespread underachievement of boys elsewhere can be seen, by contrast, as the result of more common (ineffective) teaching practices.

In the context of an Inquiry premised on the notion that boys’ current achievement rates are low, it can be seen that the repertoire of teacher input as *the* variable responsible for boys’ failure made identity management a salient issue for the

educators in attendance. The presentation of boys' underachievement as a phenomenon to be observed in 'other people's classrooms' was a means by which teachers could negotiate this concern, allowing them to manage a positive identity while maintaining the notion that 'teachers make the difference'. Where educators could link their own practice to instances of boys' success, they were able to construct their methods as effective, distinguishing themselves from other teachers whose inadequacies could be blamed for boys' more generalized failure. In Extract 3, this was accomplished on teacher Jackie's behalf through Philp's depiction of her practice as superior to that of most other educators. Extract 4, below, provides an example of the way in which the construction of boys' failure as existing 'out there' could be used to manage a teacher's *own* identity positioning within an account of poor teaching as the primary contributor to boys' underperformance.

Extract 4 opens with a question (posed by Committee Member Mr Sidebottom to Palmerston teacher Ms Maclean) as to the possible causes of boys' apparent alienation from schooling, and from studies of English in particular.

Extract 4

Mr Sidebottom—It seems to be common with literacy, which is not an English domain; it should be across the curriculum of course. If that is an area that a lot of boys seem to be alienated from—and we are talking about emotions and so forth— is it the nature of the subject or is it the delivery of the subject or is it gender and role models or is it all of it that tends to contribute to what appears to be an area that we can look to and see this alienation? What are your impressions of that?

Ms Maclean—I think you are right in saying that it is all of those things, but for me I think delivery is critical. I have worked in some English faculties where we have a very good response from boys and boys are very comfortable, particularly where boys feel nurtured—I find they respond well to English teaching. So it is all of those

facets, but delivery is really critical. I think an understanding and compassion but also a liking of boys is necessary because a lot of teachers find some boys confronting. If you are comfortable with robust boys, it makes a huge difference and, if you can build links with them in other aspects of life, that pays dividends too. If you know that they are good footballers and you can tap into that because you have seen them play or whatever, that gets a very good connection going.

(Palmerston, N.T. 1313)

Extract 4 builds a detailed account of the direct relationship between effective, compassionate teaching practice and boys' academic success. Maclean's argument is explicit in attributing responsibility for boys' achievement to effective educators and, in turn, implicitly constructs the corollary: that teachers are to blame when boys fail. As in Extract 3, this implication brings issues of identity management to the fore as this teacher describes and justifies her own teaching practice in a context that positions her as potentially implicated in the 'problem' of boys' underachievement.

Maclean takes up the notion of teacher accountability within a repertoire that positions teacher input as the pivotal factor in ensuring boys' successful engagement. In large part, this is achieved through her construction of boys' capacity as 'latent' and as requiring active teacher input to become manifest. Her description of boys' ability as only coming to the fore in response to teachers' active "nurturance", "understanding" and "compassion" warrants her extreme case formulation that teacher input (broadly, "delivery") is "really critical" for boys' achievement. In contrast to the depiction of boys as simply 'responsive' to appropriate interventions, teachers are positioned as obliged to be active and agentic. The effort of teachers to "like", "understand" and be "comfortable" with boys is constructed as "necessary" and educators are also positioned as responsible

for “building links” with boys and “tapping in” to potential points of connection. The active effort of boys themselves is absent; boys’ successful engagement is presented almost as a foregone conclusion if teachers are active in providing them with the input they require.

Throughout this extract, effective teacher interventions are constructed as leading to boys’ connection with schooling through a clear process of cause and effect. Maclean argues that “where boys feel nurtured...they respond well” and where teachers are “comfortable with robust boys, it makes a huge difference”. Constructions of this kind serve to accomplish a direct relationship between teacher input and boys’ success. This is particularly clear where Maclean explains that building “links” with boys “pays dividends”, a metaphor of transaction that is explicit in building causality (Potter, 1996).

The cause-and-effect reasoning typical of accounts of teacher input as ‘critical’ functions to build teacher responsibility through the construction of boys’ responses to specific teaching strategies as obvious and consistent. For example, the homogenous depiction of “boys” as “responding well” to feeling “nurtured” supports the argument that if there are strategies of this kind that ‘work’ teachers have a responsibility to employ them. In turn, such transactional constructions, resting upon the unquestioned assumption that boys *can* succeed when appropriate conditions are provided, position teachers as ultimately responsible for the underachievement of any boys they have ‘failed to engage’. Further, in Extract 4, this ‘failure’ enables teachers to be seen as morally culpable when boys underachieve. Not only does this mean that they have prevented the manifestation

of their boys' potential, but they have also failed to live up to the fundamental expectations of their role: to provide "nurturance" and "compassion" to the students in their care.

As in Extract 3, the construction of teachers as responsible for boys' poor performance makes the negotiation of a teacher's own identity potentially problematic. Maclean explains that she has "worked in some English faculties where we have a very good response from boys". This statement links Maclean's own practice to evidence of successful outcomes without appearing boastful; these positive results are attributed to "faculties" of which she has been a part rather than to her own superior abilities. Further, the implicit connotation that she has worked in other faculties that were *less* successful constructs her breadth of experience, positioning her as someone who is aware of factors that make a difference to the levels of success achieved across different educational environments. The accomplishment of this knowledge builds the credibility of her contention that "delivery is really critical". Maclean's use of the pronoun 'you' presents her examples of effective delivery from a 'first-hand' perspective, implying that her knowledge of what works is gleaned from her own experience but may be generalized more broadly ("if you're comfortable with robust boys, it makes a big difference and, if you can build links with them in other aspects of life, that pays dividends too"). This personal presentation of efficient practice contrasts with the construction of poor teaching methods as existing 'out there' ("a lot of teachers find some boys confronting").

In the section above, discussion of the repertoire of teachers as ‘critical’ was presented in general terms. It was argued that the construction of teachers as able to ‘make or break’ boys’ achievement heightened teachers’ responsibility for boys’ failure and positioned male students themselves as reactive, rather than agentic, within the learning process. The management of personal identity within the repertoire of teachers as ‘critical’ was also addressed. It was shown that constructions of individual teachers as responsible for their students’ achievements reproduced the notion that boys’ failure, more generally, could be blamed on *other* teachers’ less effective practices.

The remainder of this chapter expands upon the above analysis, drawing attention to the specific interventions held to make up teachers’ ‘critically important’ input with regard to boys’ achievement. This analysis will address the interpretative repertoires through which particular practices were constructed as representing the crucial aspects of ‘good teaching’, the absence of which was routinely positioned as the ‘cause’ of boys’ underperformance.

More specifically, the sections that follow address accounts of teachers as responsible for male students’ failure when they do not adequately identify and accommodate boys’ academic ‘needs’. It is not the intention of this analysis to argue that teachers *should not* aim to offer differentiated provision, but to highlight consequences of the specific version of ‘masculine requirements’ at the heart of these dominant accounts. As was argued in the introduction to this thesis, constructions of ‘what boys’ need’ depend upon homogenized representations of how, and what, boys *are*. Where teachers are held responsible for accommodating

‘male ways of learning’, their practice may be seen to reify and normalize these dominant gendered patterns – constraining *alternative* options for boys’ successful engagement with school. In this section, then, constructions of teachers as obliged to acknowledge and accommodate boys’ ‘specific learning requirements’ will be problematized on two related grounds. Firstly, as has been indicated in previous sections, constructions of teacher responsibility for boys’ failure will be shown to deflect attention away from the critical interrogation of schoolboy masculinities, towards an intensified surveillance of educators. Secondly, it will be shown that such accounts legitimate a reform focus on ‘masculine learning traits’ and, in doing so, encourage teachers to normalize and accommodate a limiting/essentialized version of ‘what it is to be a boy in school’.

3.3 Teachers as obliged to identify boys’ specific learning ‘needs’

A second broad interpretative repertoire identified within the data positioned teachers as responsible for boys’ underachievement when they fail to identify boys’ specific learning ‘needs’. These ‘needs’ were constructed as factual, inherent and obvious to all informed educators. An understanding of boys’ learning ‘requirements’ was depicted as the only means of providing male students with an appropriate education, and teachers who neglected to ‘acknowledge’ these needs were held to be professionally ‘irresponsible’.

3.3.1 ‘We must acknowledge boys’ needs if we are to cater for them appropriately’

Extracts 5 and 6 are typical of accounts depicting boys’ academic ‘needs’ as factual entities to which teachers are professionally, and *morally*, obliged to respond. Here, teachers Mrs Henshall and Mr Burchnall build the necessity that teachers

acknowledge and accommodate boys' specific learning 'requirements', held to result from biological gender differences embedded in the brain.

Extract 5

Mrs Henshall—I would like to turn to boys' needs. Our knowledge in this area has come from teaching children, obviously, from observation of boys, from research, and from psychologists and various experts in the field. One area which has been crucial in formulating our ideas has been knowledge about the difference between the male and the female brain. These differences include the rate of development as well as particular strengths for males and females. These have an enormous impact on learning, in particular during the first years of school, because these years are critical in establishing a firm foundation in literacy. We must acknowledge this as a community and ensure that young learners are given the very best opportunity to acquire literacy skills.

(Ringwood, Vic. 219)

Extract 6

Mr Burchnell—There is interesting research going on at the moment as to the way children learn, that very complex way the brain works, different learning styles that people have. That is an area that still is fertile for further research, so that we really understand better how children learn and, out of that, particularly how boys learn, perhaps as opposed to how girls learn. I do see that as an area where further research might be very valuable. I know it is easy to say more money should be spent but the different learning styles and different teaching methodologies are very important to both understand and address if we are really going to cater for the needs of boys. We have got to employ, in our classrooms and with boys, different ways of engaging them rather than just through perhaps the traditional literary approach.

(Adelaide, S.A. 846)

In each of these extracts, the notion that boys have specific learning 'needs' that must be understood and addressed works as a 'common-place' (Billig 1996), a taken-for-granted assumption that does not require explicit justification. This construction may be seen to reflect the dominant ideals of 'child-centred education', a philosophy in which students are held to be the central focus (rather than simply

the 'objects') of a teacher's methodologies (Walkerdine 1998). The first line of Extract 5 ("I would like to turn to boys' needs") orients to the salience of accounts of boys' 'requirements', presenting discussion about this issue as an obvious and necessary aspect of efforts to address boys' underachievement. Likewise, through reference to existing expert knowledge ("interesting research going on at the moment"), Burchnall bolsters the factual status of gendered learning styles ("how boys learn...as opposed to how girls learn") as a necessary, and "valuable", field of concern. As these extracts illustrate, the taken-for-granted status of boys' broadly construed educational 'needs', and teachers' obligation to understand and meet them, was central to the positioning of teachers as responsible for boys' underachievement throughout the Hansard transcripts.

Although the notion that boys have learning 'needs' was uncontested, the specific form taken by these requirements tended to be established via detailed and often technical explanations. Extracts 5 and 6 both build an account of boys' generic 'needs' as rooted in biology, constructing differences between male and female brains as the physical underpinnings of gendered 'learning styles'. In Extract 6, the anchoring of "how children learn" in "that very complex way the brain works" points to a biological explanation for questions as to "how boys learn, perhaps as opposed to how girls learn". In Extract 5, this link is made even more explicit where Henshall explains that "one area which has been crucial in formulating our ideas" about boys' needs has been "knowledge about the differences between the male and female brain". Circular reasoning is evident within Henshall's account in that the facticity of gendered 'brain differences' is imputed *from* behavioural evidence (she argues that "these differences include the rate of development as well as particular

strengths for males and females”) but is later constructed as impacting *upon* learning behaviours (“these have an enormous impact on learning, in particular during the first years of school”). Within arguments of this kind, the ‘real’, biological basis of boys’ learning ‘needs’ and ‘styles’ is justified in retrospect; behaviour comes to be seen as evidence for, and a consequence of, crucial biological gender differences.

The construction of gendered learning differences as originating within the brain serves two main functions in accounts of this kind. Firstly, the construction of boys’ needs as biologically based builds the facticity of these requirements. For example, in Extract 5, Henshall constructs current knowledge about boys’ needs as having been formulated on the basis of “differences between the male and female brain” that have been ‘uncovered’ by research. In Extract 6, the factual nature of boys’ needs is accomplished through the use of what Gilbert & Mulkay (1984) have termed a ‘truth will out’ device, evident in Burchnall’s argument that research will ‘ultimately reveal’ the basis of gendered learning styles. He constructs further research into the “way the brain works” and “different learning styles” as the route to an eventual “understanding” of how boys, as opposed to girls, learn. Each of these arguments depicts boys’ learning ‘styles’ and ‘requirements’ as inherent, constant and unequivocally ‘discoverable’.

Reductionist accounts of boys’ needs as biologically based and revealed by research also serve to apportion responsibility for boys’ underachievement. This is accomplished through the construction of scientific knowledge about boys’ needs as bringing with it certain obligations. In Extract 5, an account of research as having

brought to light “crucial” information about gender-specific factors that “impact” on learning makes it essential that teachers “acknowledge” these issues if they are to give students “the very best opportunity”. In Extract 6, Burchnall presents a similar claim, building the importance of further research into learning styles on the grounds that understanding and addressing these factors is essential if “we are really going to cater for the needs of boys”. These constructions rest upon another ‘commonplace’: the notion that teachers must *understand* the basis of student needs if they are to deal with them effectively. ‘Understanding’, in this context, equates with adopting the dominant binaristic and essentialist accounts of gendered learning differences that have been provided by ‘research’. Within such an account, teachers who fail to acknowledge these differences are positioned as uninformed, irresponsible and as neglecting to recognize the factors that impact most significantly on their students’ achievement.

Within the repertoire of teachers as obliged to ‘identify’ boys’ requirements, the construction of boys’ needs as factual, objective and critically important builds the moral necessity that they should be ‘acknowledged’. The imperative to act upon scientific knowledge, and to understand the ‘basis’ of boys’ needs in order to respond to them effectively, serves to privilege accounts of boys’ requirements as ‘inherent’ and as ‘there to be discovered’.

3.3.2 ‘Teachers are responsible for the ‘diagnosis’ of boys’ learning needs’

Across the transcripts, constructions of inherent ‘male learning needs’ worked in conjunction with accounts of teachers as obliged to ‘diagnose the nature’ of particular gendered requirements. While boys’ needs were generally construed as

residing within their ‘brain functioning’ or ‘learning styles’, identification of the specifics of their requirements was depicted as a task for which teachers are ‘professionally responsible’.

In Extract 7, secondary teacher Ms Jameson offers the Committee an account of this kind. This extract illustrates the way in which the construction of educators as possessing particular insights into individual student requirements built the obligation that they *use* these skills to ‘diagnose’ boys’ needs.

Extract 7

Ms Jamieson—I think work on the pathways and providing multiple pathways is important, but we need to get them focused at an early age on that. At the moment we are waiting until year 10 and that is too late. I think the boys particularly get a wake-up call about the second semester in year 12. They realise they have got six weeks of school to go and they decide they have to do some work. We have got to start the talk earlier. We have got to expose them to more, give them more opportunities and more variety, particularly the boys, who are very hands-on. We have got to cater for all the needs of the boys. I think we have to listen to the boys; that is the other issue. Trying to talk to them is a challenge in itself. Trying to get them to come today was a challenge because they did not want to know about it. Their attitude was ‘There’s nothing wrong with us.’ So we have got to find a way to communicate with them, find out their needs and try to tap into that. I guess we have to start that at a very early age.

(Woodridge, Qld 551)

This account begins with a discussion of the role of boys’ own actions and attitudes in their achievement problems: Jamieson explains that it is late in Year 12 before boys “realize they have got six weeks of school to go and they decide they have to do some work”. Ultimately, however, the construction of boys’ own behaviour as problematic gives way to an account in which boys are positioned as blameless.

Poor performance in later years (a last minute rush to complete year twelve) is presented, not as boys' fault, but as evidence that boys' teachers have failed to meet their underlying 'needs'. The solution Jamieson provides is for teachers to "start the talk earlier" and to "cater for all the needs of boys"). The circular reasoning evident in Extracts 5 and 6 can be seen once again in this extract: boys' underperformance is taken as evidence of their 'unfulfilled requirements', which are used, in turn, to explain their poor performance.

The argument presented within Extract 7 positions teachers as responsible for 'finding out' and fulfilling boys' needs from an "early age", before it becomes "too late". Such an account builds the connotation that there is a critical period in which specific interventions *must* be provided if boys are to have any chance of success in the latter years of schooling. This argument explicitly enforces teacher responsibility through the depiction of boys' leaning needs as incontrovertible, and of their impact as significant (and *permanent*) in cases where they remain unmet. The notion that boys' needs are there for teachers to "tap into" also enforces the factual status of boys' requirements, this metaphor working to present boys' needs as 'there to be discovered'.

The accomplishment of boys' needs as 'factual', and as needing to be 'revealed' and 'understood' before they can be addressed, builds the moral necessity that teachers should use their knowledge and position to 'identify' boys' requirements. Jamieson presents teachers as obliged to take up the challenge to "listen" to boys and "find a way to communicate with them" in order to "find out their needs". In this account, the role of teachers in shaping boys' educational experiences (they are at liberty to

determine the amount of “exposure”, “opportunities” and “variety” their students receive) is held to bring with it a responsibility: that teachers must discern student needs to ensure that their provision is appropriate. A stark contrast is created between the immutable ‘nature’ of boys’ needs (they have an objective existence that must be ‘found out’ and ‘catered for’) and the flexibility of teaching methodologies. While boys are powerless to change their ‘needs’, teachers are held responsible for moulding their own practice, through considered provision and creative communication, in order to understand and accommodate boys’ requirements. The diagnosis of boys’ needs becomes a central component of an educator’s role, a process that *must* be carried out if a teacher is to be effective and fulfill the basic expectations associated with their position.

A circular argument establishing boys’ needs as ‘awaiting identification’ is also evident in Extract 8, below. In this account, the depiction of boys’ poor literacy as resulting from an internal, essential ‘inability to cope with reading and writing’ constructs boys’ limitations as beyond their power to change. In turn, teachers are positioned as responsible for ‘diagnosing’ boys’ difficulties in order that appropriate ‘treatment’ may be provided.

Extract 8 is drawn from a discussion between Committee member Mr Cadman and teaching colleagues Mrs Receveur and Mrs McDonough.

Extract 8

Mr CADMAN—In your experience, have you been able to link behavioural problems in boys with lack of literacy?

Mrs Receveur—Yes.

Mrs McDonough—Yes. We encounter them all the time. I think that boys more than girls, may be embarrassed about their inability to cope with reading and writing. They can generally speak very well, but they cannot read, or translate their thoughts into writing. They have had to develop other means of coping with their ‘disability’, so they use bad behaviour. We have to deal with some pretty awful behaviour that sometimes comes up—some very attention-seeking behaviour and some very disruptive behaviour—so we have to get around that before we can get them to settle down and learn.

Mr CADMAN—Do you notice a change then?

Mrs McDonough—Once their attitude changes to, ‘Yes, they are here to help me’ and they settle down and listen, we get a much better response. We can see that they do improve dramatically, yes.

(Morningside, Qld 1241)

Once again, circular reasoning is at the heart of Extract 8, as boys’ actions and behaviours are explained in terms of what boys *are*. This argument rests upon McDonough’s construction of boys as burdened by an inherent “inability” with regard to literacy that sees them forced to use “bad behaviour” as a survival mechanism (“they have had to develop other means of coping”). Within this linear account, categorization swiftly becomes explanation; the implicit depiction of “attention-seeking” and “disruptive” behaviour as ‘symptoms’ serves to accomplish the existence of an underlying “disability”.

The categorization of boys as disabled in the literacy area serves a variety of functions within Extract 8. Firstly, it works to position boys as non-culpable for their underperformance and any bad behaviour that may accompany it. Boys are depicted as almost entirely passive and blameless throughout the account; their acting out is presented, not as willful, but as something that “sometimes comes up” as part of their “coping” process. This construction allows the extreme nature of boys’ “pretty awful” behaviour to be read as evidence of the seriousness of their ‘underlying’ problems.

Further, the claim that boys “can generally speak very well, but they cannot read, or translate their thoughts into writing” presents boys’ disability as specific and allows the notion of their general capacity for achievement to be protected and maintained. Boys are not ‘bad communicators’ (they can “speak very well”) and they are not without good ideas (their problem is simply with the “translation” of these thoughts into writing). In turn, the argument that boys’ ability to achieve is unquestionable builds teacher responsibility to identify boys’ difficulties and to address the obstacles that are preventing them from ‘showing what they know’.

It is the necessity that teachers ‘diagnose’ boys’ problems that is the most significant function of this ‘disability’ account. McDonough constructs the root of boys’ difficulties as something that is not immediately obvious and that requires investigation and effort to uncover. While other teachers might take boys’ “pretty awful”, “attention seeking” and “disruptive” behaviour at face value, McDonough builds the necessity that teachers identify and acknowledge the cause of these ‘symptoms’. Her account presents such understanding as an incentive for teachers to be active in developing different means of getting “around” boys’ surface difficulties in order to facilitate their achievement. Justification for the existence of boys’ ‘disability’ is provided through the claim that such remedial interventions ‘work’. Teacher input (in this case, “dealing” with boys’ awful behaviour and getting them to “settle down and learn”) is shown to be the catalyst for their “dramatic” improvement, building the moral obligation that educators *should* be taking such steps. Although the boys’ own “attitude” shift is presented as part of the process of turning their results around, teachers are still depicted as the critical

factor. Boys' attitudes are presented as changing when they begin to see teachers as "here to help", but only when teachers present them with evidence to that effect.

In the analysis presented so far, the construction of boys' needs as factual was shown to establish a professional responsibility on behalf of teachers to 'identify' and 'acknowledge' these requirements. In the next section, attention will turn to the ways in which the construction of gendered needs as 'immutable' served to position changes to (comparatively 'flexible') teaching practice as the only means of addressing boys' learning needs and raising their outcome standards.

3.4 Teachers as obliged to 'address' boys' learning needs

The third pervasive repertoire identified within the data was inextricably linked to the second, positioning teachers as responsible for adapting their practice in order to 'address' and 'accommodate' boys' specific learning needs. Within this repertoire, it was argued that teaching styles, instead of being 'inflexible' and 'automatic', should be constantly adapted to reflect students' learning styles. More specifically, it was held that teachers are 'critically responsible' for ensuring that their practice creates an optimal learning environment for their male students, and for 'adjusting' their usual methods to meet boys' learning needs.

As has been the case in each of the extracts presented thus far, the notion that boys (and girls) might employ a variety of (possibly overlapping) learning styles is absent from the extracts that follow. Indeed, the excerpts to be discussed add further weight to the argument that representations of 'gendered needs' *constitute* the differences they seek to reflect, downplaying within-group variability as they

construct a *version* of ‘boyiness’ that teachers are obliged to ‘accommodate’ and, in turn, reproduce.

3.4.1 ‘The teacher must create a classroom ‘environment’ that suits boys’ learning needs’

Extract 9 provides a concise example of a form of account that typically positioned teachers as responsible for modifying their practice to fulfill boys’ learning ‘requirements’. In this account, boys’ needs are constructed as both factual and constant, enabling the argument that teaching practices should be structured so as to create a learning environment that ‘accommodates’ and ‘provides’ for them.

Extract 9

Mrs Henshall—It has been, and is, our task to create and now maintain an environment here where the boys feel valued and have a sense of belonging and connectedness, where they are able to learn successfully and where they can say what I think are the most important words, ‘I can. I can do it.’ We took what we believe are the essential ingredients for successful learning and then looked at what we knew of boys and their particular needs and structured our school to suit them.

(Ringwood, Vic 218)

As was the case in the previous extracts, the (homogenized) construction of boys’ ‘incontrovertible needs’ is pivotal to Extract 9. Here, the speaker builds an account of teachers as ultimately responsible for creating a classroom environment in which boys’ requirements are met and they are “able to learn successfully”. This responsibility is constructed as comprising two component parts: the necessity that teachers foster an educational climate that optimizes boys’ chance of success, and the requirement that their practice be structured, from the outset, to reflect boys’ learning needs.

The account opens with an argument that teachers must be active in their efforts to provide a supportive classroom environment that is conducive to boys' success. The strength of this account lies in the rhetorically self-sufficient nature of the notion that feeling "valued" and having a sense of "belonging and connectedness" are necessary for student achievement. This construction reflects the ideals of child-centred pedagogy, with its 'whole student' emphasis on emotional well-being as a central facet of educational engagement. Moreover, it positions teachers as having an absolute influence over boys' achievement prospects. In this extract, teachers are held to control ("create", "maintain") the climate of "value", "belonging" and "connectedness" necessary for boys to be able to "learn successfully".

The causal relationship between the fostering of 'a good classroom climate' and boys' success is accomplished in the extract through the anecdotal nature of Henshall's claims. She explains that "it has been, and is, our task to create and now maintain an environment " in which boys can say "the most important words, 'I can. I can do it'". This statement builds a personalized account in which the link between provision of the 'right environment' and boys' self-confidence and success is presented as something the speaker has witnessed. The active voicing (Wooffitt, 1992) of "I can. I can do it" allows Henshall to present this response as emblematic of the reaction displayed by a range of boys who have experienced the positive environment maintained throughout her school and, presumably, within her classroom. Such a construction presents boys' needs and responses as constant and predictable, strengthening the argument that educators must adapt their practice to provide the conditions that may be almost 'guaranteed' to result in boys' success.

The corresponding argument is also clear: where teachers neglect to revise their methods, and thus provide a less than ideal environment, the failure of their boys is to be expected.

The notion that boys have stable and inherent learning needs to which teachers must 'adjust' their practice is the second premise presented in Extract 9. Henshall depicts the success of male students at her school as the result of an explicit, and total, orientation toward the fulfilment of their needs. "We took what we believe are the essential ingredients for successful learning and then looked at what we knew of boys and their particular needs and structured our school to suit them" is the story of her school's success. This account prioritizes the fulfilment of boys' needs over any a priori educational methods or ideals; while the "essential ingredients for successful learning" were considered, it is suiting the "particular needs of boys" to which the school was ultimately structured, and teachers were required to adapt their own practice to suit these sedimented traits.

The argument that teachers must accommodate (an homogenized version of) boys' academic 'needs' is elaborated even more comprehensively in Extract 10. As was frequently the case throughout the transcripts, boys' 'requirements', in this extract, are conflated with a 'masculine learning style'. In turn, male students' achievement is held to be dependent upon the provision of strategies that suit their learning orientation and work to create a 'boy-friendly' classroom climate.

Extract 10

Mr Cook—It is quite clear that, from a physiological wiring point of view, the brains are different. Boys in the simplest terms are more out there and they respond better to physical things, to movement and to overt activities involving risk taking and competition. Girls are more inwardly focused in their learning. Girls can sit, can take things in and can manipulate images in their brains without being as physically and demonstrably active. So an ideal classroom for a boy will have movement, will have people moving around, building things and creating structures, and have little groups competing one against another for some task or topic involved with the learning. This is just a very quick stereotype. In a co-ed school we believe it is very difficult to accommodate those different learning styles. We are fortunate in a boys school in that we can concentrate just on the boys. We can create learning environments where we believe boys will respond best.

(Brisbane, Qld 609)

Throughout the Hansard records, accounts of boys' 'needs' commonly (and not surprisingly) worked in tandem with accounts claiming the existence of gendered 'learning styles'. In a majority of cases, 'learning needs' and 'learning styles' were terms used interchangeably to represent inherent, biologically-based traits held to give rise to the need for specific, targeted teacher interventions. In many instances, constructions of boys' 'learning style' served to build the argument that male students have a hard-wired capacity to learn effectively only when particular teaching methodologies are employed. The presentation of learning styles (like 'learning needs') as constant and inflexible served to hold teachers responsible for adjusting their 'teaching style' to reflect and accommodate the 'learning styles' of boys. Such an argument is evident in Extract 10 as the speaker builds an account of the particular strategies required from teachers to create the kind of classroom "environment" in which boys learn "best".

Extract 10 begins with an argument that observable discrepancies in the learning styles of boys and girls reflect underlying differences between male and female brains (“It is quite clear that, from a physiological wiring point of view, the brains are different. Boys in the simplest terms are more out there and...Girls are more inwardly focused in their learning”). In locating the ‘cause’ of gendered learning differences within the domain of “physiology”, this account serves to categorize boys’ and girls’ learning behaviours as the result of ‘predispositions’ rather than as ‘preferences’ or ‘learnt reactions’. Cook’s claim that boys “respond” well to “physical things, to movement and to overt activities involving risk taking” functions as evidence that boys are ‘hard-wired’ to have particular reactions to certain educational stimuli. Likewise, the assertion that girls “can manipulate images in their brains without being physically and demonstrably active” presents this style of learning as the reflection of an inherent capacity enabled by the specific configuration of girls’ mental circuitry.

The construction of gendered learning styles as anchored in, and constrained by, “physiology” serves two primary functions within Extract 10. Firstly, it gives weight to the notion that it is possible to create an “ideal classroom” that suits boys’ learning capacities. Through the depiction of boys as “wired” to be “more out there”, Cook justifies his argument that boys *require* an active learning environment. His claim that “an ideal classroom for a boy will have movement, will have people moving around, building things and creating structures, and have little groups competing one against the other” is therefore positioned as a means of “accommodating” boys’ existing predispositions rather than as a means of reproducing, or even teaching, hegemonic ways of ‘doing masculinity’. In this

account, the positioning of boys as powerless to control the way their brain functions sees teachers held responsible for adjusting their practice so as to provide the “activity”, “building” and “competition” tasks to which boys’ “respond best”.

Cook’s “physiological” account of gendered learning differences also functions implicitly to depict many current classroom environments as ‘skewed’ to favour girls. Cook’s construction of female students’ ability to learn effectively in passive contexts (“Girls can sit, can take things in and can manipulate images in their brains without being as physically and demonstrably active”) presents them as possessing an innate advantage within traditional, didactic classroom settings that do not emphasize the activity boys ‘need’. Cook’s claim that the contrasting learning capacities of boys and girls are “difficult to accommodate” in a co-ed school heightens the sense of male disadvantage in those contexts. While the construction of girls’ “inwardly focused” learning style presents female students as self-reliant and able to succeed in conventional, passive settings, boys’ style is held to be dependent upon active and creative teaching strategies. This account builds the obligation that teachers must accommodate boys’ learning style, not only as a means of optimizing their achievement, but also so as to refrain from creating a classroom environment in which boys are actively disadvantaged.

In Extracts 9 and 10, teachers were positioned as responsible for creating and maintaining educational climates in which boys’ learning ‘styles’ and ‘capacities’ are appropriately accommodated. The presentation of the ‘classroom environment’ as having a critical impact upon boys’ achievement prospects served to build the obligation that, once the ‘fixed’ nature of boys’ requirements is acknowledged and

understood, teaching strategies that address these needs and optimize boys' chance of success *should* be provided.

Extracts 11 and 12, presented below, are further examples of accounts stressing the obligation that teachers 'address' boys' learning needs and styles. In these extracts, the accommodation of boys' requirements is constructed as an ongoing process, and teachers are held responsible for continually adjusting the methods and tasks they employ so that boys' capacities are tapped and they remain engaged. In accounts of this kind, the 'unchangeable' nature of boys' requirements was contrasted with the 'flexibility' of teaching methodologies, a construction that served to build the imperative that teaching styles can, and therefore *should*, reflect boys' learning styles so as to maximize their chance of success.

3.4.2 'Teaching styles must reflect learning styles'

In Extract 11, teaching practices that 'accommodate' boys' learning needs are presented as the key to improving the success of all male students. This extract is an example of the many accounts in which attending to boys' 'requirements' was prioritized, without question, over the provision of specific exercises or tasks that may be held to have 'objective' educational value. Here, Canberra teacher Mr Fletcher positions teachers as responsible for recognizing boys' learning needs, and for taking up opportunities to address them in their practice.

Extract 11

Mr Fletcher—It might be great for all the kids—girls too—to have a lot of movement in the class, but it is certainly a good idea for the boys. If you are trying to improve boys' learning, one of the things you can pay attention to is the fact that boys as a group will have

preferences for learning styles. They are splitting up classes in primary schools—I think you have visited Western Australia, where they have done that very successfully—separating them in the morning and bringing them together in the afternoon to work together. In New South Wales just recently, in western Sydney, you would have noticed that there are going to be new all boy and all girl schools. The idea that that will solve it by itself does not make any sense—just putting the boys together. I have taught in all boy schools and I do not think we did a good job in the late eighties. But I think there is an opportunity then to notice that boys do things differently and to adjust your teaching style. Just grouping them together is not the answer, but what you can do then is pay attention to their learning style and change the teaching.

(Canberra, A.C.T. 1050)

In Extract 11, teaching practices that recognize and reflect male ‘learning styles’ are constructed as pivotal to the resolution of boys’ achievement problems. Fletcher accomplishes the importance of such strategies when he argues that “If you are trying to improve boys’ learning, one of the things you can pay attention to is the fact that boys as a group will have preferences for learning styles”. This sentence does important definitional work within the account, positioning boys’ underachievement as a problem to be resolved by teachers through a direct orientation to the inherent, shared needs of all male students. Achievement discrepancies between boys and girls are held to reflect ‘underlying’ differences in gendered capacities, an argument that justifies, and is argued to necessitate, differential treatment of male and female pupils.

The construction of the ‘male learning style’ as factual, influential and as shared by all boys is at the heart of Extract 11. Although Fletcher presents boys’ favouring of particular learning methods as a group “preference”, his account makes clear that this predilection is determined by essential male qualities rather than being a matter of choice. The claim that movement is “certainly a good idea for the boys” builds

the implication that boys' 'predisposition' for active learning is a male trait that precedes teaching interventions. Likewise, the depiction of boys' learning styles as a "fact" that teachers can "pay attention to" and "notice" solidifies the inherent and factual nature of these preferences. Gender is therefore positioned as having a salient and inflexible impact on student learning, which justifies an approach to remedying boys' underperformance that foregrounds flexible and gender-specific teacher interventions.

Once male and female learning differences are established, it follows that gendered achievement discrepancies may be related to the failure of current teaching methods to suit the learning styles of boys and girls in a manner that is fair and symmetrical. Although this claim is not made explicit within Extract 11, Fletcher's account nonetheless presents boys', as opposed to girls', learning styles as inadequately understood. His claim that the introduction of boys-only classes gives teachers the "opportunity to notice that boys do things differently" builds the implication that male learning styles are unlike the (presumably 'feminine') learning preferences that are usually accommodated, and may go 'unrecognized' within traditional classrooms. Furthermore, the notion that knowledge about boys' "different" style of learning may be used to help teachers "adjust" their teaching style implies that educators' current, 'automatic' teaching methods are somehow inadequate for male students.

The responsibility of teachers to address boys' learning needs is therefore accomplished in this extract in a number of ways. The implication that boys' learning styles are less visible than those of girls functions to create the obligation

that educators ‘attend’ to male preferences to ensure that their practice is not gendered inequitably. A further obligation is accomplished through the depiction of single-sex classes as providing educators with an “opportunity” to notice boys’ preferences and to “adjust” their teaching styles accordingly. This construction, grounded in the assumption that good teaching orients to student needs, holds teachers as compelled to understand and accommodate boys’ learning styles if they identify as ‘committed to improving boys’ achievement’. Where gender-specific methods are demonstrably effective (the speaker cites a Western Australian school’s “very successful” split-sex program), informed, responsible teachers are held to be those who “pay attention” to boys’ learning style and “change” their teaching accordingly. The link between an understanding of boys’ learning and altered teaching practice is presented as inevitable, and teachers whose methods are not gender-targeted may be seen to have rejected the opportunity to improve their educational provision.

In Extract 11, the pivotal role of teachers in addressing boys’ underperformance is made clear. The effort, understanding and flexibility of teachers, above factors such as the institution of single-sex environments, is positioned as instrumental to improving boys’ achievement. In turn, the moral obligation that teachers discharge their responsibilities appropriately is heightened; Fletcher’s account challenges educators to take the “opportunity” to adjust and improve their practice so as to provide what boys require.

The challenge to teachers to address boys’ needs through effective tasks and strategies is also laid out in Extract 12 by Ms Jeffcoat, an Assistant Curriculum

Director within the Catholic Education system. Like Extract 11, the following account depicts teacher input as having a significant impact on boys' success, positioning educators' methods as either appropriate and accountable, or the cause of boys' failure. In this extract, flexible educational methods that are 'adjusted' to suit boys' needs and interests are held to represent 'professional' teaching.

Extract 12

Ms Jeffcoat—I feel that there should be, for teachers presently engaged in the teaching profession, some additional opportunities to reflect on practice, particularly in the aspects of literacy and numeracy, and then to challenge them on the approaches they are using in the classroom to reflect on their practice, to look at whether they are using appropriate strategies that appeal to boys' interests and to the styles of learning that we have indicated are predominantly male. Are they choosing texts, for example, that are representative of boys' interests? A whole range of materials is highlighted in the research. If that were encouraged throughout the profession, or if professionals were encouraged to reflect on that, just by reading the information they would certainly be challenged in this approach. So, professional development is one area.

(Brisbane, Qld 617)

The argument put forward in Extract 12 is premised on the notion that informed, professional teaching practice is necessarily oriented toward addressing students' inherent needs and learning styles. Through an account that builds the fixed nature of male "interests" and "styles of learning", the speaker positions teachers as responsible for adjusting their methods so as to engage and appeal to boys.

Jeffcoat's account is clear in building the claim that the current practice of classroom teachers is often uninformed and inappropriate for male students, and may therefore be linked to their underachievement. Her argument that teachers "would certainly be challenged" if they were to access "information" and "reflect on

their practice” with regard to teaching boys implies that educators’ ‘automatic’ methodologies are less than ideal. This claim may also be seen to depict teachers as generally complacent, a positioning perhaps mitigated by the notion that they do not often have the time to engage in critical self-appraisal (“I feel that there should be ... some additional opportunities to reflect on practice”).

Contrastingly, Jeffcoat’s depiction of ‘model’ methods of teaching boys highlights the need for awareness and accountability. She positions educators as responsible for actively moulding their practice to suit boys’ documented, underlying requirements, emphasizing the need for “strategies that appeal to boys’ interests and to the styles of learning that we have indicated are predominantly male”. This construction accomplishes the ‘critical’ nature of a teacher’s input; although boys’ learning styles are immutable, teaching styles *can* be adjusted to improve boys’ learning and therefore *must* be chosen responsibly. Further, Jeffcoat’s account works to conflate teaching methods that actively “appeal” to boys with the provision of a good education’ in that such strategies are positioned as informed and “appropriate”.

Through reference to “research” and “information”, Jeffcoat builds the claim that there are ‘facts to be known’ about boys’ learning of which teachers should be aware. The construction of this ‘evidence’ of boys’ distinct learning preferences justifies an approach to the assessment of teacher effectiveness against gender-specific criteria. Moreover, it enables an account in which only educators who attend to gendered learning needs are positioned as aware and responsible. Jeffcoat repeatedly labels teachers as “professionals”, and this categorization, with its

associated expectations of informed and skillful practice, positions teachers as obliged to understand and utilize available research ‘evidence’ about boys’ learning if they are to be identified as responsible educators.

3.5 Teachers as obliged to be ‘active’ in educating boys

A common thread throughout the previous two sections was the construction of contemporary teaching practices as generally ‘asymmetrical’ in addressing the learning needs of male and female students. The depiction of boys as ‘active’ and girls as ‘passive’ learners supported accounts of female students as predisposed to higher levels of achievement in the ‘chalk and talk’ environment of conventional classrooms. Similarly, the notion that educators aiming to improve boys’ performance would need to become ‘better informed’ and to ‘adjust’ their practice served to build the implication that boys are disadvantaged, relative to girls, by current ‘automatic’ or ‘unconsidered’ teaching methods. The final analytic section of this chapter addresses such accounts, drawing attention to claims that boys’ underachievement results from ‘default’ teaching strategies that more effectively accommodate the learning styles of girls than those of their male peers.

The fourth repertoire identified throughout the Hansard records was that which positioned teachers as obliged to be ‘active’ in meeting the educational needs of boys if they are to refrain from inadvertently ‘favouring’ female students. Within this repertoire, it was argued that conventional, didactic teaching practices suit girls’ preference for passive learning, while meeting boys’ need for dynamic activities and environments was held to require a greater level of understanding and effort than the majority of teachers tend to employ. Accounts of this kind served to position

educators as responsible for boys' underachievement when they take the reprehensible route of falling back into 'comfortable' or 'lazy' teaching styles.

Analysis in this section will attend to the management of individual teacher accountability within a repertoire that positions imprudent educators as responsible for 'impeding' boys' achievement. It will also focus on explicit claims that 'default' teaching styles result in unfair gendered outcomes, and the usually implicit contention that the perpetuation of these styles is the 'fault' of (female) educators whose feminine approach does not 'suit' male students.

3.5.1 'Pressure to be passive means boys pay the price'

Extract 13 is an example of the kind of account that established a causal link between boys' underachievement and automatic, didactic teaching methods that do not enable the 'active learning' boys are argued to require. In this extract, teacher Mr Macandrew positions 'default' teaching strategies as responsible for boys' low achievement, yet argues that the employment of such methods is inevitable as educators are placed under increasing pressure.

Extract 13 follows a question from the Chair as to whether boys' underperformance should be seen as a problem, and as to possible causes of the gendered attainment disparity.

Extract 13

Mr Macandrew—I would agree that there is a problem, and my perception is that it is an increasing problem. An aspect I would like to focus on is the style of learning that we are forced into in a lot of schools, I feel—that is, boys and girls spend a lot of time basically

sitting at a desk for 50 or 60 minutes at a time, being talked to by a teacher. That is fairly passive learning. I think boys need more activities than they are getting at the moment. The traditional activity based subjects are disappearing out of the curriculum for a variety of reasons. You cannot get a tech studies teacher. They are like hen's teeth to recruit. Therefore, when a tech studies teacher retires and you cannot get one, it is very tempting to end up replacing them with a dance teacher or something, and so you end up with dance on the curriculum where there was tech studies. A lot of that is happening across the board. We are certainly struggling more with kids' behaviour these days. Classes are getting more difficult to manage. Again, the automatic response is to drop back into saying, 'You all sit at your desks in rows and speak only when you are spoken to,' instead of going out with them and doing an activity or an excursion and coming back and writing about it or something. There is a lot of pressure like that which is increasingly forcing schools to become places of passive learning.

(Palmerston, N.T. 1308)

Throughout Extract 13, a clear relationship is established between boys' underachievement and teaching methods that fail to provide opportunities for active learning. Macandrew argues that boys' low attainment is an "increasing problem", reflecting a corresponding shift towards subjects ("traditional activity based subjects are disappearing out of the curriculum") and teaching strategies ("Classes are getting more difficult to manage...the automatic response is to drop back into saying 'You all sit at your desks in rows and speak only when you are spoken to'") that position students as reactive recipients. After establishing boys' requirement of interactive learning experiences as a focal point for discussion of their underperformance, Macandrew's detailed depiction of the ways in which schools are being forced to "become places of passive learning" is strongly suggestive of a causal link. The roots of boys' declining achievement are made clear as the contention that "boys need more activities than they are getting at the moment" is set against the claim that a passive "style of learning" is increasingly expected across the educational board.

The management of the speaker's own accountability is a salient issue within this extract; as an educator he is implicated in the perpetuation of the 'passive learning' he identifies as the prime impediment to boys' success. It follows that, if he understands and appreciates boys' need for activity, Macandrew should provide opportunities for interactive learning or at least justify his choices if he fails to take such steps. Ultimately his account does the latter as he argues that he and other teachers are often *unable* to provide boys' preferred tasks and environment because they are under the "pressure" of external factors.

Macandrew explains that the aspect of the boys' underachievement issue on which he will focus is the passive "style of learning that we are forced into in a lot of schools". This sentence is critical to Macandrew's articulation of both the problem and his own blamelessness within it. He positions passive learning as a problem that is experienced across the board (through use of the pronoun "we"), that is beyond educators' control (teachers "are forced") and that is occurring at an institutional level ("in a lot of schools"). This construction functions to immunize the speaker from the accusation that his failure to provide boys with active learning owes to his own professional shortcomings. Instead, it depicts the over-provision of passive learning experiences as something for which the *whole population* of teachers is responsible, but for which they are excused on the grounds that the specifics of their practice are being dictated by external "pressures".

Although the construction of the 'pressures' under which teachers operate is drawn upon specifically to excuse the use of passive teaching strategies, the source of these

coercive forces remains vague throughout the extract. It is unclear what or who is responsible for pushing the inactive “style of learning we are forced into in a lot of schools”. Likewise, the disappearance of activity-based subjects and increasing behaviour management difficulties are only tenuously linked to the pressure teachers experience (after describing these issues, Macandrew states simply “There is a lot of pressure like that which is increasingly forcing schools to become places of passive learning”). This vague construction of pressure may be seen, firstly, to manage educators’ accountability with regard to passive teaching practices (the ‘pressure’, rather than teachers themselves, are responsible). Secondly, this vagueness enables an account in which the speaker can absolve teachers of blame without making a specific attribution of blame to others (principals, the education department, students, etc). Macandrew thereby manages his stake through the production of an account that lacks the detail required for it to be pinned down as an attempt to ‘pass the buck’.

Additional strategies are employed by the speaker to manage his own accountability for boys’ underachievement while simultaneously blaming the problem on inadequate teaching practices. One of these is to distance himself from his generic account of problematic passive teaching styles. Macandrew argues that “boys and girls spend a lot of time basically sitting at a desk for 50 or 60 minutes at a time, being talked to by a teacher”. The generality of this account (“a teacher” could be *any* teacher) depicts reliance on ‘chalk and talk’ teaching as a profession-wide problem, rather than a personal shortcoming for which individual teachers (like Macandrew himself) should be held responsible. Similarly, Macandrew’s nominalized depiction of the reversion to didactic teaching strategies as “the

automatic response” to behaviour management problems inoculates him from individualized blame. ‘Passive teaching’, although generally discouraged, is justified in this construction as the unfortunate, but understandable, response of *any* teacher “struggling” with student behaviour. While each of these strategies manages the speaker’s self-presentation, they both work, ultimately, to establish a link between ‘default’ teaching methods and boys’ underachievement that is unequivocally problematic and construed as largely inevitable.

Within a repertoire of teachers as obliged to be ‘active’ in providing boys with an ‘appropriate’ education, the “disappearance” from the curriculum of the active subjects that suit boys’ preferences is positioned, in Extract 13, as a further example of the education system’s contribution to boys’ achievement difficulties. Yet while the gendered repercussions of default, inactive teaching strategies are made clear in the extract (“boys need more activities than they are getting at the moment”), the gendered consequences of the corresponding decline in “activity based subjects” are presented only implicitly.

In explaining that “you cannot get a tech studies teacher”, Macandrew presents the reduction in ‘active’ subjects as beyond the control of educators and their institutions. This account therefore serves, once again, to manage the accountability of the teaching profession (schools have not chosen to do away with active subjects; teachers of these courses are simply *not there*). The extreme-case claim that tech teachers “cannot” be found is bolstered through Macandrew’s expression “they are like hen’s teeth to recruit”, a vague idiomatic formulation (Edwards & Potter, 1992) that is difficult to challenge on factual grounds. Once established, this claim serves

as evidence of a wider phenomenon; the inability of schools to employ tech teachers stands as an explanation of the broader decline in activity based subjects (“A lot of that is happening across the board”).

Yet while Macandrew’s tech teachers example is presented simply as a (presumably random) illustration of a general pattern, its deployment has specific and gendered effects. What Macandrew depicts as a neutral selection process dictated by the constraints of teacher availability (the scarcity of tech teachers means that “when a tech studies teacher retires and you cannot get one, it is very tempting to end up replacing them with a dance teacher or something”) may also be read as an account judiciously chosen to build the case that default employment strategies, like default teaching methods, are skewed towards the ‘feminine’. Although framed as something that simply “ends up” happening, this account of stereotypically masculine “tech studies” being replaced by stereotypically feminine “dance” (as opposed to any other subject) builds the implication that the poor performance of boys may be linked to the ‘feminization’ schools at the level of curriculum and also, potentially, at the level of teacher *gender* (presumably a polarization exists between the number of males and females teaching these respective subjects). Given that “dance” is clearly a subject involving the movement and ‘activity’ boys are argued to require, it may therefore be inferred that the salient problematic relationship Macandrew is presenting is that between the *femininity* of subjects/teachers and the passivity held to impede boys’ success. In the end, then, while Macandrew’s ostensibly neutral account manages his own accountability by linking boys’ underachievement to pressures ‘beyond an educator’s control’, it nonetheless reproduces an implicit attribution of responsibility to *female* teachers.

Extract 14 is a further example of the type of account in which ‘comfortable’, (rather than ‘active’ or ‘informed’) teaching styles were held to have inequitably gendered consequences. In this Extract, Griffith teacher Mrs Crossingham argues that the automatic methods of most teachers place girls at an unfair academic advantage in that such practices are ‘feminized’ – disproportionately ‘suited’ to female learning preferences.

Extract 14

Mrs Crossingham—One of the problems with this sort of inquiry is that it is based on generalizations. We can look at what is happening in our boys’ class and in our girls’ class, and talk about the main group in each room, but there are groups in both rooms that the situation is affecting in different ways. They are not the mainstream of the groups. They are finding other events happening. Whether they were in a single sex class or a mainstream class, their learning styles and difficulties would still be apparent. It is not necessarily gender based; it is about learning styles. As Bobby, Tracey and I have said, you walk into the boys’ room and you approach it one way because you are making an assumption about boys’ learning styles. You walk into the girls’ room and you approach it a different way because you are making an assumption about girls’ learning styles. When you have a class that has two sexes in it, you are immediately focusing on one learning style or another and you tend to go back to your most comfortable teaching style. Unfortunately, personally I believe that most of our teaching styles suit the majority of female students. What teachers need to learn is how to recognize learning styles and how to change their teaching styles, and that is a big ask.

(Griffith, N.S.W. 1166)

As was the case in the previous extract, the argument developed in Extract 14 builds the claim that boys’ relative underperformance can be attributed directly to automatic teaching styles based upon “assumptions” rather than genuine efforts to understand and address gendered learning requirements. Although Crossingham begins her account by entreating the Committee to acknowledge the diversity of

academic requirements *within* each gender group (“in our boys’ class and our girls’ class” there are different groups “in both rooms”), she ultimately explains boys’ underachievement through the homogenized construction of a ‘gendered response’ to default teaching practices (“Unfortunately, personally I believe that most of our teaching styles suit the majority of female students”). This account points to something unitary and fixed about students of each gender. If a particular “teaching style” can “suit” girls, the implication is that female students as a group have a predictable reaction to particular methods, which may be taken as evidence that they do have a specific “learning style”. Moreover, this account positions boys as actively disadvantaged across the board, implying that their poor performance is the result of factors beyond their control. The responsibility of educators is clearly underlined, for if teachers’ “comfortable” (or default) style of delivery actively favours a “majority” of girls, then to persist with such methods may be seen as highly irresponsible. To avoid the (morally reprehensible) outcome of disadvantaging boys, teachers are positioned as having to be active in “recognizing” what they are doing to affect outcomes, and the resulting implication is that educators who fail to modify their automatic strategies can be held accountable for the underachievement of their male students.

The management of accountability is negotiated in Extract 14 through the use of slightly different strategies than were employed in the previous extract. Whereas Macandrew (Extract 13) absolved himself from blame for boys’ underperformance by presenting himself (and other educators) as having been ‘forced’ to employ problematic passive teaching strategies, Crossingham may be seen to *accept* personal responsibility for the negative impact of default classroom strategies. Yet

while she positions herself within the category of teachers who “make assumptions” about gendered learning styles, she manages her accountability by presenting this behaviour as common to the practice of *all* teachers. In her claim that “you walk into the boys’ room and you approach it one way because you are making an assumption about girls’ learning styles”, Crossingham’s use of the pronoun “you” constructs the general and unremarkable nature of the situation she presents, depicting it as a generic, rather than individualized, account. Likewise, her claim that “When you have a class with two sexes in it you are immediately focusing on one learning style or another” builds a sense of inevitability that inoculates her from particularized blame; the implication is that *any* teacher in the same situation would necessarily act in this way. Through this general account, the speaker is able to mitigate her responsibility at the point when her accountability needs managing most: where she admits to employing the very default teaching strategies that, she argues, favour girls.

Although Crossingham accepts responsibility for her role in disadvantaging boys (“When you have a class that has two sexes in it...you tend to go back to your most comfortable teaching style. Unfortunately, personally I believe that most of our teaching styles suit the majority of female students”), the generic nature of the account limits the extent to which she may be held individually accountable, positioning her as ‘no more to blame than any other teacher’. From there, Crossingham does further work to manage her own accountability, and that of all members of her profession, through her claim that “What teachers need to learn is how to recognize learning styles and how to change their teaching styles, and that is a big ask”. This statement performs two functions, the first of which is to build a

positive identity positioning for the speaker through her self-presentation as aware and informed with regard to the potential solutions and pitfalls in addressing the 'boys problem'. Secondly, it works to justify the widespread use of default teaching strategies (educators who employ them are not irresponsible but have simply not been taught to "recognize" boys' specific learning needs).

By the end of the extract it may be seen that, while Crossingham's account explains and excuses educators' use of default teaching strategies, the unproblematized link between these methods and boys' relative underperformance establishes informed educational practice that is specifically boy-oriented as the key to improving boys' achievement, and associates automatic/conventional practice with the 'problematic feminine'. It may also be seen that the gender-neutral focus on individual learning needs initially advocated in the Extract ("It's not necessarily gender-based; it is about learning styles") ultimately justifies interventions targeted specifically at male students. This is accomplished through the presentation of boys as a group of individual students whose learning needs and responses happen to be shared ("comfortable" teaching strategies do not "suit" them). Through this construction, the implementation of non-default (presumably more masculine) strategies aimed at improving boys' success may then be read as a vital part of providing individualized, student-oriented teaching, rather than a political step towards 'righting the gender balance'.

As has been illustrated in the analysis of the previous two extracts, within the repertoire of teachers as obliged to be active in educating boys, 'default' or 'automatic' teaching practices were depicted as problematically 'feminized' and as

a significant impediment to boys' success. In these accounts, the inaction typified by a reliance on comfortable teaching methodologies was taken to represent a significant *action*; educators who employ default classroom strategies were held directly responsible for placing boys at an academic disadvantage. As a consequence, the provision of boy-oriented teaching strategies was framed as a means of ensuring equality against a background of conventional practice that is skewed to 'favour' girls.

In the context of accounts in which inactive teaching strategies were held responsible for impeding boys' success, it has been argued that teachers faced potential challenges in the negotiation of their own accountability. This was managed, in Extract 13, by presenting the reversion to passive teaching, not as a personal failing, but as something into which many educators are forced as a result of external pressures. In Extract 14, an account of default teaching as 'difficult for any teacher to avoid' limited the extent to which the speaker could be blamed individually for her role in perpetuating the passive practices by which, as she argued, boys are disadvantaged.

The final account presented for analysis in this section, Extract 15 below, also draws upon a repertoire of default teaching strategies as unfairly beneficial to girls. In this extract, however, the speaker (social worker Ms Moleta) is not a teacher and may therefore be seen to face different issues with regard to identity and stake management than were evident in the previous extracts. From a purportedly independent position, Moleta builds an account in which boys' underachievement is

linked implicitly to the ‘feminine’ nature of traditional school environments and explicitly to the teaching styles of female educators.

Extract 15

Ms Moleta—There is quite a lot of research that indicates that boys and girls learn quite differently but I do not think that that is always implemented at the school level. Sometimes there are creative ways of structuring the school day in a conventional school—for instance, adding some kind of physical activity into the school curriculum. I have seen that done very creatively as part of the curriculum where it is incorporated into maths and so forth. It works really well, identifying that boys and girls do learn differently. In primary school most of the teachers are women and they probably tend to teach in the style that is compatible with the way they learn. I do think all these other things, if they are implemented in schools, cut down the need for the special facilities. Sometimes children do benefit from that but I think that that would be and should be the minority
(Canberra, A.C.T. 1079)

In Extract 15, the construction of inherent, discrete gendered learning styles is pivotal in enabling the argument that boys’ achievement is hindered at the levels of curriculum content and delivery within conventional classrooms environments. The factual status of these gendered differences forms the basis of the overarching contention presented in this extract: that the inherent learning styles of boys and girls are disproportionately accommodated by contemporary teachers and methods, to the detriment of male students. As a non-teacher, Moleta may be seen to have little stake in her description of the impact of classroom interactions and student-teacher relations on gendered achievement outcomes. Her role as a school social worker sees her positioned simultaneously as a first-hand expert (she has access both to “research” and her own observations in a variety of classrooms) and impartial analyst (unlike ‘implicated’ teacher witnesses, Moleta’s own practice is

not under question) and, as such, her account of the ‘facts’ of gendered learning styles attracts a particular credibility.

At the outset, Moleta builds the ‘reality’ of gendered learning differences through reference to a broad range of legitimating evidence (“There is quite a lot of research that indicates that boys and girls learn quite differently”). Once the ‘fact’ of these styles is established, the failure of schools to identify and accommodate them both is offered as the root cause of the male-female achievement discrepancy (“I do not think that that is always implemented at the school level”). Her explanation is bolstered through recourse to anecdotal evidence; Moleta explains that addressing boys’ and girls’ specific needs is demonstrably effective (“Sometimes there are creative ways of structuring the school day in a conventional school...I have seen that done very creatively as part of the curriculum...It works really well, identifying that boys and girls do learn differently”). The argument mounted here serves numerous functions, the first of which is to build the moral necessity that schools address learning needs in gendered terms, a course of action depicted as not only *possible* (Moleta has “seen” it done) but *guaranteed* to be successful (“It works really well”). Knowledge of gendered learning styles therefore brings with it an obligation to act, the consensus of research and anecdotal evidence heightening the moral imperative that schools address gendered needs in order to maximize achievement.

More significantly, though, Moleta’s account functions to build the clear implication that it is boys who are primarily disadvantaged by educational practice that fails to acknowledge gendered learning needs. In the context of an inquiry

premised upon the existence of a 'boys' underachievement problem', even the ostensibly impartial call for teachers to put into practice the understanding that "boys and girls learn quite differently" implies asymmetry in the extent to which these styles are currently accommodated. Slightly more explicit in establishing boys' disadvantage is Moleta's assertion that "Sometimes there are creative ways of structuring the school day in a conventional school - for instance, adding some physical activity into the school curriculum". The obvious connotation, in this case, is that contemporary schools are inequitably suited to girls if the inclusion of "physical activity" (a taken-for-granted male learning requirement) is presented as a "creative" innovation that stands in contrast to the activities typically provided in "conventional" classrooms. As was the case in Extracts 13 and 14, traditional, default or "conventional" educational methodologies are constructed as weighted in favour of girls' success, while boys' achievement is held to require something *extra*, in this case thoughtful and "creative" teacher effort.

The factual construction of gendered learning styles that underpins Moleta's implicit argument about boys' disadvantage is also the foundation for her eventually explicit attribution of blame to female teachers. Moleta's claim that "In primary school most of the teachers are women and they probably teach in the style that is compatible with the way they learn" invokes two levels of femininity that may be seen to impede boys' success: the femininity linked to 'default' teaching practices (women educators making no more effort than simply to teach "the way they learn" are clearly failing to provide the energy and "creativity" boys require) and that associated with *being female* (women teachers teaching "the way they learn" will undoubtedly put female students at an 'advantage').

3.6 Discussion

This chapter has provided a critical investigation into accounts that position teachers as ‘responsible’ for the underachievement of boys.

The intention of the analysis was not to argue that discussion of the relationship between teaching methods and student outcomes is *not* a useful means of evaluating and improving educational practice. Indeed, as was suggested in the introduction to this chapter, critical reflection with regard to teachers’ gendered assumptions, expectations and patterns of interaction appears to be of central importance to efforts aimed at broadening the engagement and achievement options available to *all* students. Likewise, it was not the analytic purpose to argue that accounts of teacher responsibility should be *replaced* by accounts of boys as ‘to blame’ for their own ‘poor performance’. Clearly, male students’ school outcomes manifest within a complex set of social, economic and educational conditions over which boys may be seen to have limited control. Rather, the goal of the above analysis was to investigate the specific form of explanations attributing the underperformance of boys to ‘inadequate teachers’, as well as the gendered and educational consequences of these accounts. Four interpretative repertoires were identified in this regard.

The first repertoire identified was that which positioned teachers as the ‘critical factor’ with regard to boys’ achievement. In accounts of this kind, boys were depicted as passive within the learning process, while active and appropriate teacher input was constructed as the ‘key’ to their success. Within a repertoire of teachers as

'critical' boys were depicted as 'blameless', their failure linked retrospectively to their teachers' inadequate efforts.

It was shown that constructions of teachers as 'critically responsible' were established through causal accounts of appropriate teaching methods as invariably leading to the heightened achievement of boys. Based in the constructions of teacher accountability argued to be pervasive within contemporary education systems, use of this repertoire enabled teachers to manage their identity in relation to boys' poor performance. That is, it enabled teachers to present their methods as having been critically *beneficial* to their *own* male students (establishing their credentials as 'good teachers'), and to depict the more general failure of boys as the result of *other* teachers' inadequate practice. While it would seem that such accounts have some utility in terms of positively managing the accountability of individual teachers, they function more broadly to reproduce the notion that boys' achievement is something for which teachers *have to account*; for which they are ultimately responsible. Such a construction locates the cause, and potential solution, to boys' achievement problem within teachers themselves, a definition of the issue likely to result in increased teacher surveillance rather than critical appraisal of student/teacher constructions of classroom masculinities.

The second repertoire evident in the corpus positioned teachers as obliged to 'identify' boys' specific learning needs. This repertoire served to attribute responsibility for boys' underperformance to teachers who fail to 'acknowledge' or 'diagnose' boys' educational requirements. Circular arguments were central to

accounts of this kind; boys' positive response to targeted educational strategies was taken as evidence of an inherent *need* for such interventions.

In Extracts 5-8, accounts of boys' 'academic needs' worked in conjunction with the common-sense notion that educators possess a professional responsibility to differentiate the learning requirements of all students. These dual notions saw 'boys' needs' attract the status of facts observable to any teacher who is appropriately skilled and professionally motivated. In turn, educators who were witnesses to the Inquiry faced an identity dilemma: if they did not attest to existence of 'boys requirements' they risked being positioned as 'ill-informed' or 'in denial' with regard to ways in which they might optimize boys' achievement. The mutually supporting notions of boys 'inherent learning needs' and of teachers as obliged to offer 'differentiated provision' ultimately served to reify a specific version of male requirements as factual and homogenous, deflecting attention from the social and political location of accounts as to the 'nature' of boys. Further, the naturalization of dominant masculine characteristics as having their basis in 'brains and biology' builds the likelihood that responses to boys' achievement 'problems' will continue to accommodate these ways of being. Rather than investigating the construction of masculinity in educational settings such that options for boys' engagement with school might be challenged and expanded, these accounts may risk reproducing certain problematic behaviours as 'naturally male', and justifying responses to achievement issues in 'boys versus girls' terms.

A third, related, repertoire rested upon the notion that teachers are obliged to address boys' learning needs. In such accounts, the moral necessity to accommodate

boys' requirements was accomplished through the presentation of teaching styles as flexible in contrast to the unchangeable nature of gendered learning styles.

In Extracts 9-12, the 'factual' construction of boys' learning requirements was held to bring with it an obligation to act, the notion that teachers must address acknowledged 'needs' positioned as a central component of professional practice. The construction of appropriate teaching methods as necessary for the manifestation of boys' achievement further heightened this responsibility. It was shown that the depiction of boys' needs as beyond their control, and of their achievement as inevitable in conditions where teaching is appropriate, enabled boy-friendly teaching to be established as an equity intervention. Where good teaching is required to be 'fair', such arguments justified efforts aimed at raising boys' attainments, not as political actions, but as a means of ensuring 'equitable provision'. Arguments of this kind may be seen to have significant implications in that they position *all* boys as 'needy' simply by nature of their gender – a notion that obscures the (more significant) impact of issues such as race and social disadvantage on patterns of achievement, and the fact that boys already receive a larger share of educational resources owing to their disproportionate representation in programs addressing behaviour issues and literacy.

A fourth repertoire served to construct teachers as required to be 'active' in educating boys. Traditional, didactic teaching styles were presented as inadequate for male students who were constructed as only responsive to 'physical' and 'creative' educational methods. Issues of accountability were made explicit within

such accounts; educators who relied upon ‘default’ classroom practices were held responsible for placing their male students at an extreme disadvantage.

In Extracts 13-15, provision of the active, creative methods deemed most suitable for boys was constructed as requiring no more from teachers than even-handedness and effort – qualities characteristic of good educational practice. The notion that default classroom strategies ‘favour girls’ (they are unfair) and represent ‘lazy teaching’ (they are not motivated or informed) established active, boy-friendly methods as synonymous with teacher professionalism. As such, methods geared towards raising boys’ achievement could be positioned, not as interventions with significant gendered consequences, but as examples of ‘best practice’, the political implications of which were largely obscured.

Given that default teaching practices were consistently associated with *female* educators, this seems particularly problematic. The disciplining of female teachers has been identified as a feature of restructured, ‘re-masculinized’ education systems, where heightened performance pressure has increased the practical and emotional labour demands made (primarily) of women, particularly those teaching the humanities subjects in which boys’ achievement is lowest (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). It seems that constructions of female educators as predisposed to the ‘default’ methods argued to have *caused* boys’ underachievement may work to intensify this gendered pattern of blame and surveillance, under the politically neutral guise of ‘raising standards’ (Raphael Reed, 1999).

Further, the depiction of female educators as having ‘given’ girls their success at the expense of that of boys may be seen to buy into the anti-feminist, ‘backlash’ accounting that positions boys as the ‘new disadvantaged’ (Weiner *et al.* 1997). This framework positions male and female students as ‘competing victims’ (Cox, 1995), and naturalizes not only gender-targeted reform to redress achievement differentials, but a continued focus on gender (above other social or economic factors) as a legitimate site for equity concern. Such accounts have been used to advocate the use of male mentors to redress ‘obstructions’ to boys’ achievement caused by the predominance of women in the teaching force – a form of intervention with potentially negative consequences for both girls *and* boys. Not only have male mentor programs been argued to risk reversing advances made with regard to girls’ participation and achievement (by overstating these gains and calling for a ‘compensatory’ masculinization of methods), they may also be seen to reinforce hegemonic versions of masculinity *to the detriment of male students*. Initiatives valorizing unproblematic masculine models may serve to naturalize a restricted range of options for male engagement with school, reinstating (rather than challenging) stereotypical gendered limitations. Rather than taking up current concern about boys’ achievement as an opportunity to investigate the transformational potential of acknowledging multiple masculinities, male mentor programs and other boy-targeted interventions risk reproducing hegemonic constructions of ‘what it is to be a boy’, normalizing the problematic versions of masculinity they are seeking to ‘address’.

3.7 Conclusions

In broad terms, the repertoires identified in this chapter reflect the historical pattern, identified by Cohen (1998), through which responsibility for male students' underachievement has persistently been attributed to conditions external to boys themselves. The dominant constructions discussed highlight the ways in which accounts of teachers as 'to blame' refrain from implicating boys with regard to their own poor performance, and serve to naturalize boys' capacity to succeed when the instruction they receive is 'appropriate'. As Cohen has argued, explanatory accounts turning the gaze of accountability on teachers and their methods have functioned to protect male students' achievement from meaningful scrutiny, an outcome that has not served boys well. Such accounts have deflected attention from an investigation into the ways in which practices of masculinity impact upon achievement, and from the ways in which naturalized accounts of male potential might *constrain* boys' options for active engagement with school.

The discursive perspective adopted in this chapter enabled the relevance of Cohen's historical findings to be investigated, in the contemporary context, with regard to their specific form and political consequences. That is, a more nuanced interrogation of versions of teachers' responsibility was facilitated, and dominant accounts interrogated in terms of their representation of the nature of boys' underachievement and the subject positions these constructions afforded both teachers and male students.

In this regard, it was shown that accounts of educators as 'to blame' for boys' underachievement were grounded in, and reproduced, the dominant notions of

teacher accountability that have been argued to discipline (particularly female) teachers, and to lead to ‘thin pedagogies’ orienting to high outcome measures as the central goal of schooling.

It was also argued that accounts of teacher responsibility served to bolster the factual status of boys’ ‘learning needs’ – constructions serving to naturalize dominant male characteristics as ‘requirements’ to which teachers are obliged to respond as proof of their even-handedness and competence. On the basis of these connected frameworks, teachers were positioned as professionally, and morally, required to adapt their methods to accommodate an essentialized, homogenized version of boys’ ‘learning needs’. Ultimately, such accounts served to subsume efforts explicitly aimed at raising boys’ achievement (political interventions) within the ostensibly neutral rhetoric of ‘raising standards’ (where boy-friendly strategies were deemed synonymous with ‘good teaching’) and of ‘equitable provision’ (where default teaching practices were held to ‘disadvantage’ boys).

Given that such strategies have been argued to risk marginalizing female students, and restoring patterns of gender relations in favour of male interests, this seems a significant re-direction of educational and political attention.

For boys, the consequences of locating responsibility for underachievement within ‘inadequate teachers’ are also considerable. Such a formulation of this problem encourages the educational naturalization and accommodation of dominant ways of being a boy that may marginalize non-hegemonic members of this category. Moreover, attributions of teacher responsibility limit the options of all boys in terms

of negotiating successful means of engaging with learning and actively re-writing the social construction of what it is to be a 'boy in school'.

It seems that as long as educators are positioned as the 'problem' or potential 'solution' with regard to boys' underachievement, surveillance of teachers and the enforced modification of teaching practices will continue to be the primary means by which this issue is confronted. Such attributions will reproduce historical patterns through which boys' achievement has been 'naturalized', and deflect attention from the ways in which the construction of masculinities (and femininities) impacts upon educational achievement.

CHAPTER 4

BOYS' UNDERACHIEVEMENT AS THE RESULT OF 'INAPPROPRIATE CURRICULUM'

4.1 Curricular 'feminization' in the context of the boys' education debate: an overview

The 'feminization of education', argued to have occurred over the last two decades, represents a second dominant explanatory framework within the boys' achievement debate (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Like accounts of 'inadequate teachers', claims as to the 'feminized' nature of curriculum content and assessment practices have served within mainstream narratives to depict boys as the 'victims' of educational priorities 'skewed against' their needs and capacities (Swann, 1998). In such accounts, boys' declining achievement standards have been presented as a direct result of 'girl-oriented' educational shifts increasingly emphasizing literacy and continuous assessment (as opposed to 'one-off' exams) – academic areas in which boys are held to be 'naturally weak' (e.g., Sommers, 2000). In turn, boys' poor performance has been depicted as 'beyond their own control' and positioned as the result of an educational inequity that must be remedied in policy and practice (Hey *et al.*, 1998).

Throughout the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Education of Boys, accounts of the 'feminization of education' were attributed taken-for-granted status. Yet, as was found by Smith (1999), the term 'feminization' was used with a variety of referents and took a number of different forms across the hearings. Following Skelton (2002), it was possible to identify three primary ways in which schools were argued to have become 'feminized' institutions: (1) statistically ('schools are

populated by female teachers whose approach suits female students'), (2) culturally ('school organisation and practice favours feminine traits and capacities') and (3) politically ('feminist educators have set girls up to succeed and boys to fail'). These three 'locations' of feminization worked, in conjunction across the transcripts, to define boys' underachievement as a problem of *methods*; of girl-friendly academic content and testing deemed to be at odds with boys' learning preferences.

This introductory review will address literature pertaining to dominant representations of the 'feminization' of academic content and testing. Firstly, 'statistical' and 'political' constructions of this shift will be examined. Accounts of female, and feminist, educators as having 'produced' male underachievement (via their choice of assessment practices and political curricular agendas) will be contrasted with claims that contemporary schools may, in many ways, be seen as increasingly *masculinized* institutions. Secondly, versions of the 'cultural' feminization of schools will be presented. In particular, representations that depicted literacy-rich curricula as a 'cause of boys' underachievement' will be examined, and the 'gendering' of language skills discussed. Finally, an historical analysis of the relationship between gender and curriculum/assessment will be provided. Following Cohen (1998), it will be argued that the longstanding pattern of attributing boys' underperformance to inadequate methods absents discussion about the intersection of educational expectations with the construction of masculinity.

4.1.1 The 'feminization' of schooling?

Dominant constructions of schools as 'feminized' institutions have been interrogated by critical educationalists, who have contended that the term

'feminization' normalizes the very gendered processes it positions as problematic (Burman, 2005). It has been argued that accounts of the increasing statistical, cultural and political 'female-friendliness' of schools have their basis in essentialist constructions of gender, the reproduction of which obscures the identification of individuals and trends that diverge from this 'feminized' pattern (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Statistical accounts of educational feminization have been mounted on the basis that female educators dominate the teaching profession. Such accounts have argued that this gender imbalance disadvantages boys, whose learning preferences are incompatible with the classroom expectations, curriculum delivery and assessment conventions favoured by female teachers (Delamont, 1999).

Skelton (2002) argues that claims of this kind may be critiqued on a number of grounds. Firstly, she explains, constructions of women educators as 'bad for boys' assume that female teachers only relate to curriculum and assessment in stereotypically feminine ways, and that male teachers only do so in a manner that is stereotypically masculine – reasoning that has been progressively undermined by critiques of sex role theory (see Connell, 2002). Skelton contends that the inadequacy of sex role explanations for the gendered outcomes of schooling has been evidenced by the limited success of programs aimed at placing male and female teachers in non-traditional roles. She argues that the continued absence of female scientists and mathematicians, despite an increase in female teachers of these subjects over the last twenty years, indicates that the impact of teacher gender is

neither as linear nor as straightforward as statistical ‘feminization’ accounts would suggest.

Political accounts of educational feminization (holding that feminist practice and policy has *produced* boys’ underachievement by prioritizing the learning needs of girls) have also been critiqued (Griffin, 2000). Claims of this kind have maintained that schools have shifted, at organizational and practical levels, towards a valorization of ‘the feminine’ (e.g., Redwood, 1994). Within such accounts, feminism is depicted as having ‘gone too far’, to the end that boys have been set up to fail by school systems that disproportionately promote the interests of girls (Browne & Fletcher, 1995).

In response to these claims, critical educationalists have interrogated the notion that schools are now politically ‘feminized’ institutions. Indeed, Skelton (2002) argues that organizational and management practices based upon conventional ‘feminine’ characteristics (such as a non-hierarchical management structure, inclusive/non-individualist teaching approaches and an emphasis on improving the learning opportunities of disadvantaged groups) are *not* dominant within contemporary school systems. Rather, she argues, through the institution of performative management regimes, schools may be seen to have become ‘re-masculinized’. Skelton contends that this masculinization takes a form that differs from the prioritization of masculinity challenged by feminists in the 1980s, when teachers were found to have higher expectations of male learners and to provide gender-stereotyped teaching resources. Now, she explains, a more subtle masculinization may be detected in the guise of the intensified surveillance, curriculum/testing

stratification and disciplinary codes that characterize contemporary modes of school management – a masculinization that takes a discursive form in policy and practice (see also Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2001; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Connell, 1996).

Claims as to the female-friendly ‘culture’ of present-day curriculum and assessment practices have been particularly pervasive within ‘feminization’ accounts (Burman, 2005). A contemporary emphasis on literacy skills and continuous assessment, argued to ‘disadvantage’ boys while ‘privileging’ feminine learning styles, has been specifically isolated as a ‘cause’ of male underachievement (e.g., Hill & Rowe, 1998). Boys’ ‘naturally limited’ literacy ability (Sommers, 2000) and capacity to perform well in ongoing assessment tasks (Goldstein, 1987) is argued to have been ignored; subject matter and testing procedures are held to have become inequitably skewed towards the valorization of female preferences and capacities (Hey *et al.*, 1998). For example, MacDonald *et al.* (1999) assert that “...recent changes in curricular design and assessment practices tend to favour the traditional strengths of girls” (p.17).

In addressing these claims, critics have questioned the notion that a curricular focus on literacy and ongoing assessment is representative of ‘feminized’ educational priorities. Indeed, it has been argued that the ‘communicative competence’ emphasized within literacy-rich curricula has become central to the employability of *all* students given the decline in manufacturing jobs and the growth of service-sector opportunities (Mahoney, 1998), and is necessary to enable ‘critical citizenship’ (Teese *et al.*, 1995). Questions have also been raised as to the positioning of allegedly ‘feminized’ content and testing as an inequity of the same magnitude as

that experienced by girls prior to the 1980s, and as a problem requiring similar targeted reform. In rebutting such claims, Yates (1997: 342) argues that boys' current underachievement does not reflect a 'disadvantage' comparable to that endured by girls, explaining that:

Textbooks today are not full of women and silent about men, the 'reproductive' aspects of society ... are still a minor and low-status element of the curriculum; and pedagogies which benefit girls have not made boys invisible to the teachers.

Constructions of the female-friendly 'culture' of schooling have also run counter to critical claims that contemporary curricular and assessment emphases, despite shifts towards literacy-rich learning and ongoing assessment, may be seen to maintain a distinctly *masculine* flavour. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue that contemporary learning epistemologies continue to emphasize technical knowledge and solutions to problems justified in abstract, rather than personal, terms – characteristics of a 'masculinist' learning orientation. They explain that this is evident even in humanities and social science subjects, where teachers appeal to masculine knowledge values through the selection of action and science fiction novels, and texts emphasizing the history of war.

On the basis of the above critiques of 'feminization' accounts, it has been argued that an interrogation of traditional constructions of masculinity (characterized by an avoidance of self-expression and emotional connectedness) may be more fruitful in addressing boys' underachievement than a 'boy-friendly', 'back-to-basics' approach to education in which a literacy emphasis is avoided (Martino, 1994). It is with this in mind that attention turns to concerns about boys and literacy, dominantly positioned as a central facet of boys' 'inability to engage' with contemporary educational subject matter and methods of assessment.

4.1.2 Language and learning: homogenized accounts of boys' literacy 'underachievement'

Boys' underperformance in the area of literacy has been identified as a primary contributor to the educational and broader social problems that male students are currently held to experience. Boys' high rates of suicide and truancy, as well as their over-representation in programs for behavioural/emotional problems and learning difficulties, have all been associated with low literacy and the resultant inability to express dis/connection without resorting to avoidance or aggression (e.g., Vardon, 1994 as cited by McLean, 1996). Academically, boys are argued to have been adversely affected by the current cross-curricular emphasis on verbal reasoning and written communication skills – areas in which girls are held to have maturational and socialization advantages (Hill & Rowe, 1998; Rowe, 1991). On the basis of these claims, and the notion that English language skills are essential for participation in socio-cultural life, statistics highlighting boys' relatively low literacy have been central to the construction of the boys' achievement 'crisis' (Lingard & Douglas, 1999).

Dominant representations of male students' problematic relationship with literacy have tended to depict *all boys* as being out-performed by *all girls* in terms of verbal and written abilities. These accounts have focused on the notion that boys are more likely to be 'at risk' of literacy underachievement (Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Slade, 2002) at both primary and secondary levels of schooling (Sukhnandan *et al.*, 2000). For example, it has been highlighted that boys make up 75-85% of students selected for remedial literacy attention within the *Reading Recovery* program (Clay, 1998; 2001). These findings have been reflected in achievement data: for example, year

2000 results show that 3.4% fewer Year 3 boys, and 4.4% fewer Year 5 boys, achieved the national literacy benchmarks than girls (DEST, 2002). It has also been argued that the gender discrepancy is growing - 1995 literacy data, indicating that 34% of Year 9 boys were without 'basic literacy skills' as opposed to 26% of girls, were compared with figures from 1975 to argue that the 'gap had widened' from 3 to 8 percentage points over this period (ACER, 1997, cited by Gilbert & Gilbert 1998).

The statistical accounts presented, and the blanket claims of 'male disadvantage' they have served to support, have increasingly been 'unpacked' by critical theorists. Disaggregation of achievement data has highlighted a more complex interaction between gender and literacy performance than mainstream claims suggest, cut across by issues of race and class. For example, Lingard and Douglas's (1999: 100) breakdown of Queensland literacy performance indicators suggests that:

girls outperform boys, those from non-English speaking backgrounds do not do quite as well as those from English speaking backgrounds, students in disadvantaged schools ... have a much lower mean score than all other students, with Aboriginal students obtaining the lowest mean scores of any targeted populations. Girls in each of these categories tend to do better than boys in the same category.

This pattern has also been evident in NSW (O'Doherty 1994), where Year 3 and Year 6 literacy data showed that, although girls in each socio-economic grouping did better than the boys in the same category, boys in higher groupings did better than girls in the lower groups. Teese *et al.*'s (1995) findings add to the complexity of this picture, illustrating that gender differences in literacy are more pronounced in students from lower socio-economic groups than in those from more advantaged backgrounds: while the literacy levels of working-class boys are much lower than

those of their female peers, middle-class boys and girls reach broadly comparable levels of attainment. On the basis of these differentiated analyses, it has been argued that a comparison of boys' and girls' literacy levels oversimplifies the question of 'who wins at school', reducing the complex intersection of social and cultural factors to an account of girls' success and boys' failure (Teese *et al.*, 1995).

In addition to interrogating the statistical interpretation of literacy achievement results, critical educationalists have investigated the nature of the literacy testing methods by which such data are produced. Claims of boys as 'uniformly disadvantaged' with regard to literacy have been put in question by the finding that tests of written and verbal ability often reflect class and cultural biases (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) argue, literacy tests have historically been used to confirm a 'natural order of privilege', whereby middle-class white children outperform other students – confirming the superiority of middle-class family culture. Questions have also been posed as to the breadth of literacy tests in terms of their ability to assess a range of communicative skills, and the contention raised that (some) boys may have higher levels of technological, social and functional literacies than traditional assessments reveal. Each of these critiques suggests that features of 'what is tested by the test' impact upon the validity, and meaningfulness, of an appraisal of literacy attainment couched in boys-versus-girls terms. These concerns suggest that, although literacy represents a 'problem' for some boys, there are others for whom the processes of literacy teaching and assessment work very well indeed (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

The above discussion highlights the importance of addressing literacy underachievement in a manner sensitive to the impact of socio-cultural factors – in terms of ‘which boys and which girls’ may be affected by poor literacy, rather than ‘which gender’ (Teese *et al.*, 1995). At the same time, the importance of addressing what appears to be a more generalized tension between boys and literacy has also been acknowledged. As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) explain, although the complexity of the matter must be carefully unpacked, “literacy is an issue for boys” (p.200).

They (and other critical educationalists) argue that boys’ poor literacy performance may be linked, not to an inherent gendered weakness in this area, but to culturally dominant constructions of reading and writing as intrinsically ‘feminine’ practices (Martino & Paillotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Martino & Mellor, 1995). The incompatibility of ‘connection with literacy’ and the performance of a ‘proper masculine identity’ has been argued to confound discussion of male students’ literacy performance (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). Given the pervasive cultural and curricular emphasis on ‘communication competence’, investigation into the nature of this tension has been positioned as integral to any meaningful analysis of boys’ underachievement ‘problem’ (Cohen, 1998).

4.1.3 The ‘gendering’ of literacy

The (in)compatibility of identity practices associated with hegemonic masculinity and those required for successful literacy performance has been the subject of much recent academic attention (e.g., Davies, 1997; Martino, 1995a, 1995b; Webb & Singh, 1998). McLean (1996) has argued that this tension may be traced to boys’ early induction into a dichotomous gender system. It has been noted that male and

female children have differential experiences from birth in terms of adults' verbal responses to their behaviour, exposure to gendered speech practices and modes of interacting with gender-marked toys (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Beyond their immediate experiences, children's exposure to the reading and writing practices of their parents has also been highlighted as a site in which the gendered nature of literacy is constructed. For example, it has been found that boys' earliest contact with reading is likely to be associated with their mothers (Nichols, 1994). Similarly, Monk (1999) cites survey and interview evidence that mothers tend to engage more frequently in reading books and writing letters than fathers, whose use of literacy in the home is often limited, and restricted to technical/technological tasks.

While it is important to emphasize that the construction of gender involves the active negotiation of a range of gender positionings (Edley & Wetherell, 1995) these findings suggest, as Gilbert and Gilbert (1998: 204) note, that boys typically arrive at school already

inscribed by expectations and understandings of literacy, schooling and masculinity. We should hardly be surprised, therefore, if many of them have difficulty finding a desirable subject position to occupy within the dominant discourses of 'literacy' and 'schooling' on offer in the early years of compulsory schooling.

(Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998: 204)

Alloway and Gilbert (1997) argue that the incompatibility of masculinity and literacy is manifest in the context of educational expectations that are both cultural and physical. They explain that early school literacy practices require students to become 'docile' – a disciplining of the body at odds with hegemonic versions of masculinity. Whereas early learning and cultural experiences teach (many) boys to perform a version of masculinity comprising "physical control, autonomy and independence" (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998: 205), the literate student is expected to be

passive and compliant. As Luke (1992) argues, classroom expectations related to literacy involve tidiness, neatness, holding and caring for books, empathy, and the demonstration of oral/social competence – practices potentially in opposition to the successful performance of masculine identity. Yet, as Lingard and Douglas (1999) argue, the aggressive and disruptive behaviours of boys within the literacy classroom that see them identified as having ‘learning difficulties’ are generally not addressed as a product of this tension. They explain that remedial practices tend to assume a pathological individual rather than addressing the interface of educational expectations and the negotiation of a masculine identity.

Considering the perception of literacy skills as ‘feminized’ practices (Miller, 1996), it is unsurprising that boys’ disconnection in this area has also been found to serve as a defence against ‘being gay’ (Jackson, 1998). In normative, school-based masculine cultures where schoolwork is regularly conflated with effeminacy (Epstein, *et al.*, 1998), boys may risk ostracism if they are seen to engage happily with literacy requirements. Given the pervasive nature of homophobia within dominant cultures of masculinity, a display of heterosexuality has been found to be compulsory for boys in many schooling contexts (Epstein & Johnson, 1998), and as such, distance from literacy may be seen to be ‘required’. A comment from a male high school student in Martino’s (1995a) Australian study is illustrative in this regard:

English is more suited to girls because it’s not the way guys think ... this subject is the biggest load of bullshit I have ever done. Therefore, I don’t particularly like this subject. I hope you aren’t offended by this, but most guys who like English are faggots (p. 354).

Bearing in mind these gendered associations, it has been argued that any analytic or remedial focus on boys’ literacy under/achievement must be sensitive to the

intersection of attainment in this area with male students' performance of an acceptable masculinity (Martino, 1995a).

Gilbert and Gilbert argue that because "hegemonic masculinity is such a powerful and enabling discourse, it is difficult to see why boys would willingly give up its strengths for the less attractive and less powerful discourses of literature and literacy" (p.215). This seems a particularly important point to raise, given that the performance of successful masculinities within the schooling context has been linked, not only with the 'enabling discourse' of heterosexuality, but with behaviours taken to characterize the 'inquisitive, intelligent student' (Walkerdine, 1990), whose learning is typified by 'active exploration' rather than the 'docility' required for literacy acquisition. Dominant versions of masculinity have also been connected with an approach to education that prioritizes subjects and skills with vocational leverage, such as those that are scientific, technical and mathematical (Lingard & Douglas, 1999). In this regard, subject English and literacy more generally, are not prestigious or strategic choices that expand students' post-school options (Kenway *et al.*, 1997). As McLean (1996) explains, boys' entrance into traditionally 'female' subjects may therefore be seen to signify a loss of status and power. For all of these reasons, it seems important to interrogate the notion that boys' disconnection from literacy represents a problem by which all male students are personally and socially disadvantaged.

Indeed, the complexity of the relationship between gender and literacy suggests that boys and girls experience different benefits and detriments in relation to this area. As Lingard and Douglas (1999) explain, while boys' avoidance of literacy and

tendency to choose technical/scientific subjects is vocationally beneficial, it seems to prepare them for a limited range of life situations. On the other hand, while the compatibility of literacy and femininity sees girls achieve academic success in this area, it has often not served them well in terms of enabling their take-up of other (profitable/powerful) social positions as women (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998).

In political terms, the findings of a 1997 ACER study into the relationship between literacy and post-school options (Ainley, 1997, cited by Alloway & Gilbert, 1997) are telling. This investigation found that nineteen-year-old women, whose literacy at Year 9 level had been labelled 'very high', could expect to earn \$60 a week less than nineteen-year-old men of the same literacy level. Moreover, men whose literacy had been labelled 'very low' were able to earn more than women with 'very high' literacy ability. Alloway and Gilbert (1997) argue that these results suggest literacy works as a different kind of 'critical filter' for males than females. This account has served to highlight the necessity of locating claims of boys' 'literacy disadvantage', and calls for intervention into this issue on equity grounds, within a broader social and political context.

It seems that claims of boys as 'disadvantaged' by their underperformance in the increasingly emphasised area of literacy conflate a variety of important educational and political concerns. While it appears that poor literacy performance *is* a problem affecting many boys, solutions to this issue framed in terms of 'reducing the literacy emphasis' and 'guy-ifying' curriculum may work to accommodate the very versions of masculinity that are incompatible with the successful acquisition of literacy skills

– a circumstance reproducing (rather than addressing) the disjunction between boys and literacy.

Although critical investigation into the relationship between literacy and masculinity construction has been increasingly advocated as a means of addressing boys' performance in this area, dominant accounts have nonetheless called for reform grounded in notions of boys' 'inherent gendered needs and capacities'. As Cohen (1998) argues, such accounts - positioning boys' underachievement as a problem to be remedied through a reconstitution of methods - are by no means new. Cohen argues that the historical pattern of accommodating boys (rather than investigating school-based expectations and performances of masculinity) has not served boys well; the tweaking of curriculum and assessment to improve their performance simply supporting dominant versions of masculinity that sit uneasily with academic achievement.

An account of the historical pattern Cohen describes will now be presented, and the consequences of addressing boys' underachievement via curriculum and assessment change will also be discussed.

4.1.4 Cohen's historical perspective on responses to boys' underachievement

Michèle Cohen (2004, 1998, 1996) argues that constructions of boys' underperformance as the result of 'feminized curriculum' and assessment that suits girls' 'more conscientious learning style' are by no means unique to contemporary discussion of academic outcomes. Rather, she points out that calls to address boys' poor performance via targeted curriculum/assessment reform reflect a trend evident

since the 17th Century. Her argument is that the existence of such a pattern “betrays a deep-seated commitment in our society to the achievement of boys” such that “girls’ achievement has frequently been an engine of change in educational policy” (2004: 2).

Cohen’s historical model of gendered achievement was initially developed in the context of analysing a comparison made by the philosopher John Locke in 1693 regarding boys’ relatively slow acquisition of skills in French Grammar:

When we so often see a *French* –Woman teach an *English* – girl to speak and read *French* perfectly in a Year or Two, without any Rule of Grammar, or anything else but prattling to her I cannot but wonder, how Gentlemen have over-seen this way for their Sons, and thought them more dull or incapable than their Daughters.
(Locke, cited by Cohen, 2004: 2)

Her interest in this quotation is the way in which it simultaneously acknowledges girls’ achievement and renders it invisible. Locke’s account serves to establish how easy it is to learn language in a conversational manner, an account that positions boys’ underperformance as unproblematic (presumably if they were taught the same way as girls they would enjoy similar success), and to re-establish a gendered hierarchy of intellect. Cohen’s work provides an historical analysis of accounts of this kind that attribute boys’ achievement to ‘the nature of their intellect’, and their failure to problems of methods, teachers and texts. Her investigation finds that this explanatory pattern has seen assessment and curricular emphases *repeatedly* shifted to ‘meet boys needs’, a circumstance that has functioned to naturalize boys’ achievement and to pathologize that of girls – to the detriment of *both* groups of students.

Cohen traces accounts of gendered relationships with curriculum and assessment to early 18th Century British educational literature detailing the importance of emulation and competition in promoting academic excellence. In this literature, it was argued that emulation would bring out the best in boys and lead them to excel. Yet, for female students, such competitive methods were believed to be pernicious, encouraging girls of ability to exert themselves beyond their capacity and thus to impair their physical well being. For girls, cultivation of understanding was held to come at the expense of cultivating ‘the heart’, and was at odds with valued feminine traits.

Cohen argues that the gendering of competitive assessment became even more marked in the 19th Century. She cites submissions to the British Schools Inquiry Commission of 1868 by way of example, in which girls’ capacity to follow the same curriculum as boys was assessed. Although it was argued in this context that exams would not harm girls, it was held that care should nonetheless be taken to ensure that female students did not ‘overwork’. The Commissioners noted girls’ “greater eagerness to learn and the female mind’s tendency to develop more rapidly than the male’s” (Cohen 2004: 4), a finding that was taken as grounds for concern, not as to how boys would keep up, but as to the danger of ‘overstrain’ for girls. In the context of medical wisdom positioning intellectual endeavour as increasing women’s risk of ‘atrophied maternal instincts’, care was to be taken that girls’ ‘over-conscientiousness’ be checked.

Cohen explains that concern about female ‘overstrain’ persisted into the next century. She cites a 1911 UK Board of Education report, finding that girls were:

at once more ambitious and conscientious, working harder than boys and indeed working harder than they need ... and further, that they are naturally less fitted to stand mental or nervous strain (2004: 4).

By 1923, this Board had institutionalized a response to girls' pathological 'over-conscientiousness' (as opposed to 'boys' habit of healthy idleness'): the 1968 Schools Inquiry Commission's recommendation that girls could follow the same curriculum as boys was reversed, on the grounds girls needed to be 'protected from their ambition'.

On the basis of her analyses, Cohen argues that constructions of girls' 'over-eagerness' and predisposition to 'overstrain' were means of explaining away girls' higher rates of achievement. She contends that these constructions justified changes to existing curriculum (in terms of access and content) such that a picture of boys' superior capacity could be produced and maintained.

Other studies have also noted the pattern Cohen describes. For example, Jacobs (2001) examined explanatory accounts for gendered exam performance in the specific context of 1846 exams at the British College of Preceptors for teachers of middle-class youth. Her findings suggest that girls' higher attainments in this context were taken as a sign that the exams had been made overly 'girl-friendly'. She notes that girls' superior performance led, year after year, to changes in exam content and structure at the College, but was not acknowledged as the impetus for this change. Epstein *et al.* (1998) explain that a similar course of action was taken in the 1950s and 60s in the context of the 11-plus examinations by which children used to be selected for entry into secondary schooling in Britain. They note that these exams were deliberately skewed so that girls had to reach higher attainments than

boys to gain entry to selective grammar schools – which otherwise would have been overwhelmingly populated by female students. This skewing was justified on the grounds that boys matured later than girls, and that it would therefore not be fair to deny them grammar school entry on the basis of a test undertaken at age 11. Following Cohen, it seems that, in each of these examples, boys' underachievement may be seen to have been “concealed by problematising or negating girls' achievement” (2004: 5).

In the contemporary context, where boys' underachievement is no longer seen to be 'healthy', Cohen (2004) argues that different means of re-packaging boys' underachievement, and of protecting the notion of their 'potential', are being employed. She draws upon Jackson's (2003) argument that the notions of 'laddishness' (used to explain boys' underperformance on the grounds that they don't want to assume the effeminate identity associated with working hard) and 'effortless achievement' (an acceptably masculine means by which boys may achieve) appropriate the cultural pattern of deflecting attention from boys' failure. Cohen argues that these dual concepts help boys negotiate the school/masculinity nexus so as to manage their underachievement: if they fail it is because they have not worked; if they succeed, it is not because they have worked hard 'like girls', but because of their 'natural ability'.

On the basis of Cohen's analyses, it seems that a focus on the underachievement of boys, and on curriculum and assessment practices as sites in which this 'problem' should be addressed, may be less fruitful than an investigation of the relationship between gender and academic achievement. Such an approach could address the

ways in which aspects of (some) boys' and girls' social experience and identity-management practices impact differentially on their engagement and outcomes at school. In turn, a differentiated picture of attainment could be produced, rather than resorting to the default gendered analyses that have historically justified distinctly gendered interventions.

As Martino *et al.* (2004) have argued, the accommodation of 'boys' needs' at the level of curriculum and assessment does little to address the impact of gender regimes on students' lives, or to expand their participation in activities beyond the bounds of those traditionally defined as 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Efforts to resolve boys' underperformance in this manner may be seen to reinforce existing gendered limitations in terms of educational engagement, a pattern Cohen's analysis shows has not served boys, or girls, well.

4.1.5 Framing the analysis

This chapter, like Chapter 3, investigates dominant accounts that externalize responsibility for boys' underachievement. Here, attention turns to versions of boys' poor performance as resulting from the inadequacy of the school curriculum and current measures of assessment. As in the previous chapter, attributions of external responsibility for boys' poor performance hinged upon constructions of the 'inherent qualities' of male students. Within these arguments, however, the focus was on the accomplishment of boys' gendered 'capacities' (as opposed to 'needs'). These boy-specific capacities were held to be insufficiently valued within contemporary classrooms. These accounts positioned today's academic content and testing as suited to girls' abilities and 'skewed against' those of boys. Through the

reification of gendered, inherent capacities, boys were again positioned as blameless with regard to their underachievement. Responsibility, within this repertoire, was attributed to the curriculum and to assessment strategies held to be preventing boys' from showing what they know.

This chapter will address the ways in which a repertoire of assessment and curriculum as impediments to boys' success served to externalize responsibility for boys' underperformance. Further, it will investigate uses of this repertoire to justify making changes to school content and testing practices with a view to improving boys' achievement.

Analysis in this section will address the two main ways in which responsibility for boys' underperformance was attributed to curriculum and assessment in the sampled materials.

Firstly, it will be argued that a factual construction of boys' capacities and incapacities as unchangeable functions to position current academic content and testing practices that do not take these factors into account as means of 'setting boys up to fail'. The depiction of pedagogic choices as arbitrary (it is argued that no specific subject matter or evaluation measures are necessary within the education process) builds the moral implication that these choices should not be targeted towards the (immutable) strengths of either gender. The construction of boys' and girls' inherent capacities is also held to be the crux of accounts contending that academic content and assessment has been skewed to 'suit' the abilities of girls. It will be shown that a political framework of 'presumptive gender equality' (Cox,

1995) serves to position educational practices of this kind as ‘discriminatory’ and builds the moral necessity that these methods be changed.

Secondly, the analysis will address the use of historical narrative in accounts linking the decrease in boys’ results over the last decade to a ‘feminization’ of the education system that is alleged to have occurred over the same period. Within these accounts, changing assessment practices, particularly those prioritizing literacy, are held to have been the direct cause of boys’ decreasing attainment. Constructions of the education system as solely responsible for limiting boys’ attainment serve to build the necessity that changes should be made if all students are to have an equal chance of success.

It will be argued that such accounts also function to maintain the notion of boys’ ‘natural academic potential’ and to position girls’ achievement as the fictive consequence of a ‘biased’ curriculum.

4.2 Boys as ‘disadvantaged’ by assessment and curriculum

Alongside accounts of teachers as ‘to blame’, a second dominant means of externalizing responsibility for boys’ failure was a repertoire that positioned ‘gender discriminatory’ curriculum and assessment as the cause of boys’ underachievement.

This repertoire was organized around the central notion that boys and girls have distinct academic capacities to which certain content and testing measures may be disproportionately ‘suited’. Within it, boys were positioned as ‘disadvantaged’ in a contemporary educational climate consensually characterized by an increasing

emphasis on literacy skills and continuous assessment – areas in which boys were constructed as ‘naturally less able’. Conversely, girls were routinely positioned as having been placed at an ‘advantage’ by the focus on constant evaluation (as opposed to one-off tests or exams) and language-rich content, both of which were widely held to ‘suit’ their innate strengths. Binaristic metaphors of curricular balance/imbalance and fit/non-fit worked in tandem with constructions of gendered strengths and weaknesses to build accounts of present-day curriculum and testing as ‘skewed to favour girls’. In turn, the repertoire served to depict current content and assessment as intolerably gender discriminatory (‘bad practice’) and to position a move towards subject matter and evaluation that is gender-neutral in consequence (‘good practice’) as a moral imperative.

4.2.1 ‘Curriculum and assessment are skewed to favour girls’

Extract 1 is a typical example of explanatory accounts that linked boys’ underachievement to the proliferation of literacy across all aspects of curriculum and assessment. In an account produced by teacher Mr Horsell, the disparity between male and female students’ levels of attainment is argued to result from girls’ innate predisposition for language-rich learning.

Extract 1

Mr Horsell—It is my perception, having been involved over the past decade in the education arena, that there has been a general shift in the content of the curriculum, a much fuller literacy content. The pedagogy has been much more literacy focused. The assessment processes are much more literacy focused and I think that the emphasis through those three areas has not advantaged boys and has maintained an advantage for girls where I think most of the evidence that we have seen, and you as the committee have seen, is that literacy skills, reading skills, concentration skills of girls occur

earlier, last longer, and can occur, to some extent, irrespective of the quality of teaching.

I would repeat the research of Ken Rowe that poor quality teaching has a much greater effect on boys than girls, but conversely excellent teaching has a much greater effect on boys than girls, and partly it is the difference between the chatter and clatter approaches to schooling. The chatter for girls: they talk amongst themselves, they get on with their work, they can concentrate, they can focus. The clatter for the boys, where it is activity, interaction, short sharp bursts, and I do not think the pedagogy differentiates. It is a one size fits all way of teaching. One size does not fit all.

(Adelaide, S.A. 894)

A factual, homogenized construction of boys' and girls' innate learning capacities featured strongly in accounts connecting boys' achievement decline to curriculum and assessment. Such constructions can be seen throughout Extract 1, in which the 'inherent' nature of boys' and girls' relative literacy abilities is presented as a means of explaining their achievement differential.

After outlining his entitlement to speak (highlighting his involvement in the "education arena" over the "past decade"), Horsell provides an unequivocal account of the correspondence between boys' achievement decline and curricular shifts that have increasingly emphasized literacy. His initial gloss that "there has been a general shift in the content of the curriculum, a much fuller literacy content" is bolstered through reference to specific examples of this generalization; a three-part list detailing the permeation of literacy into "content", "pedagogy" and "assessment" builds the breadth of this phenomenon. After establishing this context, Horsell presents an account of inherent gendered qualities against which these curricular and assessment changes appear to be clearly, and completely, skewed. Two three-part lists depict the extent of girls' current educational advantage; he explains that the "literacy", "reading" and "concentration" skills now required in all aspects of

schooling “occur earlier”, “last longer” and manifest in girls “irrespective” of teacher quality. The presentation of this “evidence” builds the implication that boys are distinctly *disadvantaged* in a contemporary context where educational priorities are so obviously weighted against them.

Constructions of advantage and disadvantage were a feature of accounts in which curriculum and assessment were imbued with agency and held to have assisted girls in out-performing their male peers. In Extract 1, this can be seen in the speaker’s depiction of content and testing as the active change-agent with regard to shifting patterns of achievement. His statement that the increased emphasis on literacy has “maintained an advantage for girls” functions to locate the cause of boys’ underperformance within the curriculum rather than in boys themselves, and to portray girls’ success as something they have been ‘given’ rather than something they have earned. Further, the assertion that girls’ success reflects the “fit” between current classroom practice and female students’ innate orientation to learning (the “chatter approach”) suggests that curricular and assessment shifts have actively placed male students at an achievement ‘handicap’.

Against the background assumption that gendered capacities remain fixed while curricular priorities are flexible, it follows that it is difficult to justify the inclusion of content and testing that ‘advantages’ students of either gender. Unless such an orientation has intrinsic value in terms of learning outcome, the use of ‘gender-biased’ curriculum and evaluation measures may be read as an unacceptable violation of the central principles of educational equity. This line of argument is implicit throughout Extract 1, and centres around a depiction of the proliferation of

literacy as an educational “shift”. This neutral descriptor may be seen to position the literacy emphasis as ‘arbitrary’, rather than as a necessary reflection of professional and social spheres in which communication skills are increasingly demanded. Horsell goes on to depict this baseless focus as having had only fictional consequences; boys’ failure, like girls’ success, is presented simply as an artefact of this inbuilt educational ‘bias’ (“one size” teaching “does not fit all”). Without reference to any coherent rationale or academic value, and by emphasizing the discriminatory nature of the current language focus, the account ultimately presents the ‘literacy push’ as educationally, and morally, insupportable. In turn, this depiction of content and testing as actively and unjustifiably biased positions curricular reform aimed at raising boys’ achievement as necessary for the maintenance of educational gender equity.

Extract 1 served as an illustration of the dominant argumentative strategies used to position boys as disadvantaged by ‘gender-skewed’ curriculum and assessment. Within it, the construction of boys’ and girls’ innate capacities, particularly with regard to literacy, functioned to depict current language-rich content and testing as inherently gender-biased. The presentation of this literacy emphasis as an arbitrary orientation that has ‘manufactured’ girls’ success worked to define curricular reform as a vital means, not only of improving boys’ performance, but of counteracting educational gender discrimination.

Extract 2 is a further example of the repertoire of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ by curriculum and assessment, and follows a similar argumentative pattern to that observed in Extract 1. Although Extract 2 focuses more heavily on establishing the

gender bias of currently fashionable assessment measures (as opposed to ‘girl-friendly’ literacy content), it features the same central constructions of gendered capacities, advantage versus disadvantage and the arbitrary, flexible nature of current educational priorities.

Extract 2 is a section of talk produced by Perth teacher Ms Cook. This excerpt follows a direct question by Committee Member and federal parliamentarian Julia Gillard as to changes over the last 20 years that may explain the development of a gendered achievement differential.

Extract 2

Ms Cook—Perhaps it is to do with the way in which we have changed our assessment procedures as well. They have changed dramatically over the last 20 years and at the TEE level there is now much more of a focus on school-based assessment and continual assessment than, say, when I was doing my tertiary admissions exams. What we found in the science information that we have collected is that, where there is a process of group work with students working through a problem together and then going away and do some questions independently, the girls did better on the questions that resulted or followed from the group work than the boys did. It seemed like that emphasis on collaborative learning and talking in small groups actually did not provide the same level of benefit to the boys as it did to the girls in the subsequent activity that followed from that. That is one indication that I think is worth exploring further—that the kinds of processes that we regard as being good teaching practice now do not necessarily suit all kids and perhaps have a gender bias in them themselves.

(Perth, W.A. 965)

In Extract 2, the repertoire of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ is, once again, organized around the central assumption that boys and girls possess distinct, disparate academic capacities to which particular educational assessment methods may or may not be ‘suited’. As was the case in Extract 1, the recent proliferation of tasks

deemed to match girls' inherent skills (in this case, the increased emphasis on "school-based and continual assessment" as opposed to one-off tests and exams) is positioned as directly responsible for boys' achievement decline. The causal link between these factors is established through a depiction of the "dramatic" nature of the shift towards contemporary assessment methods ("there is now much more of a focus on school-based assessment and continual assessment") and the inappropriateness of such testing for male students (research evidence "collected" attests to boys' poor performance wherever continuous/group assessment is employed).

An account of assessment as 'at odds' with boys' innate preferences and capacities does important attributional work within Extract 2, serving to define learning/evaluation methods as a 'cause' of boys' underperformance. This may be seen most explicitly where Cook interprets her research finding that "the girls did better on the questions that resulted or followed from the group work than the boys did" as evidence that such a method "did not provide the same level of benefit to the boys as it did to the girls". Here, the claim that current assessment bestows unequal gender "benefits" brings with it clear connotations of the (unfair) advantage girls currently experience. Once again, agency is ascribed to the current testing conventions held to be "providing" disproportionate learning assistance to male and female students, and thereby 'handing' girls their success. This line of argument presents assessment reform as necessary, not only to avoid gender discrimination (in the form of inequitable, gendered "benefits") but so as to get the results *right* (girls' success, resulting from an inbuilt 'head-start', may be seen to be inauthentic).

As was the case in Extract 1, the implicit depiction of present-day assessment priorities as ‘arbitrary’ also served to justify the reformulation of current testing methods. Throughout Extract 2, reference to any rationale underlying the emphasis on group-work and continuous assessment is entirely absented, the shift towards these methods categorized neutrally as a “change”. Rather than referring to the intrinsic educational merit of current evaluation methods (for example, the potentially valuable communication and team skills explored in the context of group-work), Cook establishes the “level of benefit” provided as the primary criterion against which the value of assessment techniques should be measured. Specifically, the claim that an “emphasis on collaborative learning and talking in small groups actually did not provide the same level of benefit to the boys as it did to the girls” works to define the purpose of assessment as ‘the facilitation of academic success’, rather than ‘the development and evaluation of inherently valuable learning experiences’.

Through the evaluative framework developed in her account, the current pedagogic focus on continual/collaborative assessment is positioned as insupportable on two related grounds. Firstly, this emphasis is constructed as having no intrinsic value to warrant its maintenance; it is simply one of a range of potential assessment orientations. Once this arbitrariness is established, there appears to be little justification for retaining methods that provide gender-discriminatory educational “benefits”. Secondly, the contemporary assessment focus is called into question on the grounds that methods resulting in unequal gendered outcomes necessarily represent ‘bad educational practice’. The final statement that “the kinds of processes that we regard as being good teaching practice now do not necessarily suit all kids

and perhaps have a gender bias in them themselves” clearly conflates ‘good educational and assessment practice’ with that which is gender-neutral in consequence. Once again, this claim is grounded in the construction of the current assessment focus as arbitrary, *equality* of outcomes taking precedence over specific *quality* of outcomes as a measure of educational efficacy.

In each of the above extracts, the repertoire of boys as disadvantaged by current assessment and curriculum served to position the underperformance of male students as the result of factors beyond their control that must be changed for the preservation of educational gender equity. The construction of boys’ innate capacities as entirely incompatible with the ‘all encompassing’ present-day emphasis on literacy and continuous evaluation was central to these accounts, locating the cause of boys’ achievement decline (and potential solutions to this ‘problem’) within contemporary curricular and assessment priorities. In turn, these priorities were constructed as ‘arbitrary’, the intrinsic educational value of such methods outweighed by their ‘discriminatory’ (insupportable) consequences. The presentation of boys’ failure, and girls’ success, as the result of fundamentally ‘skewed’ content and testing served ultimately to justify reform in this area with the express intention of ‘levelling out’ gendered achievement discrepancies.

As was observed in the above extracts, many speakers across the corpus presented the ‘gender-skewed’ nature of content and testing as a phenomenon that has been only recently detected. In Extracts 1 and 2, for example, both speakers depicted this ‘bias’ as having come to light during the retrospective search for the cause of shifting attainment patterns. Within such accounts, this ‘new finding’ was held to

bring with it an obligation to act, the assumption being that these unanticipated and gender-discriminatory results, once identified, must be immediately redressed.

A second, dominant argumentative pattern within the repertoire of boys as 'disadvantaged' involved the presentation of current curricular and assessment priorities as having been instated *in the knowledge that* they would have unequal gendered consequences. Such explanatory accounts positioned boys' current underperformance, not as the unfortunate outcome of otherwise well-intentioned methods, but as a result that *could* have been predicted and therefore *should* have been avoided. Through this line of argument, changes to curriculum and assessment were established as a means of rectifying an inequity for which teachers and educational policy makers may be seen as morally culpable.

4.2.2 'Curriculum and assessment have set boys up to fail'

The repertoire of boys as 'disadvantaged' is evident in Extract 3 within an account that, once again, attributes male underperformance to the 'gender-biased' nature of current subject matter and testing. The factual construction of gendered capacities that was a feature of the previous extracts works, here, to present boys' underperformance as the predictable result of an increasingly 'feminized' curriculum. A depiction of male (in)capacities as immutable works to position boys' current failure as the obvious and inevitable consequence of methods designed, from the outset, to place an (unjustified) emphasis upon 'innately feminine' skills.

Extract 3

ACTING CHAIR—Peter, you said assessment methods need looking at. Have you done any work on assessment methods and compared them with what they were 20 years ago and what they are now?

Dr West—I think Ken Rowe has done that better than I have. I have skimmed and looked at other people's research, but I have not done the research myself, no. But, again, I think it is Ken Rowe who was looking at the maths syllabus and saying that what was a simple row of sums years ago is now much more complicated and there is much more reading in papers. People show me exam papers and they are huge things. It makes it difficult for boys to negotiate.

ACTING CHAIR—I hear, anecdotally, they are more verbal, which favours girls, of course, and the same in mathematics exams and even science exams.

Dr West—Indeed.

ACTING CHAIR—The visual spatial components of those examinations that I remember do not seem to be present anymore.

Dr West—Dr Nelson is not here today but the doctors I speak to find quite laughably the idea that males are not different from females. The biology is quite different; the brains are different. If you are going to give them questions, they will tend to react in different ways. That is not to say everyone is going to react in different ways, but there will be a tendency with an overlap.

ACTING CHAIR—You were here, I assume, for other witnesses today. What is your view of this denial of biological factors?

Dr West—I suspect I am with you—and, as I said, there is an overlap. Listen to what my colleague says about England: if you give boys these questions, especially about girls and their feelings, the boys will tend to crash—not all of them, but most of them; if you give girls questions about feelings, they will tend to do well. We do raise boys and girls in different ways. I am talking about nurture, you are talking about nature. The review I read of biological differences was very subtle and was moving, but she said that, in the end, organisms which are made up differently tend to react differently.

(Sydney, N.S.W. 348)

In Extract 3, Sydney academic Dr West deploys the repertoire of boys as 'disadvantaged' within an account steeped in the language of biological determinism. The central argument in this account, that differences between male and female brains mean that boys and girls will "react in different ways" to specific educational methods, underpins an implicit explanation of male underachievement

as the result of modern curriculum and assessment that is ‘at odds’ with boys’ capacities and has therefore ‘set boys up to fail’. The notion that such curricular shifts may have been a necessary means of removing barriers to girls’ achievement is entirely absent from this account, and present-day content and methods are assessed only in terms of their influence on relative gendered attainment.

The facticity of biologically-based, gendered capacities is co-constructed by West and the Acting Chair throughout the extract. West’s initial claim that literacy-rich exam papers are “difficult for boys to negotiate” is ratified by the AC’s agreement that “they are more verbal, which favours girls”, establishing the consensual construction of binaristic, essential (in)abilities (and the potential for particular methods to be skewed towards or against them). West also builds the factual status of gendered capacities by highlighting as ridiculous any attempt to deny them. This is achieved through his claim that “the doctors I speak to find quite laughably the idea that males are not different from females. The biology is quite different; the brains are different. If you are going to give them questions, they will tend to react in different ways”. In this statement, the facticity of biological and resultant learning differences between boys and girls is bolstered through the presentation of West’s account as based upon the consensual opinion of experts entitled to knowledge in this area with which it would be ridiculous to disagree.

Although West clearly foregrounds the biological basis and generally ‘fixed’ nature of boys’ and girls’ learning responses, he does not present the distinction between these capacities as discrete or absolute. Hedging is a salient feature of West’s account, which may be seen in his repeated categorization of gendered learning

differences as ‘tendencies’. Through his claim that “there will be a tendency with an overlap” with regard to male versus female performance, West’s explanation appears to account for variation, while at the same time establishing the existence of significant gendered trends that are otherwise broadly encompassing.

Further hedging may be noted towards the end of the extract, where West alludes to the potential influence of socialization on gendered learning capacities. Here, the notion that “we do raise boys and girls in different ways” serves to temper an otherwise deterministic account, allowing the speaker to present his argument as balanced and informed; he has not ‘ignored’ the accepted significance of socialization on educational ability. However, the potential for socialization to override biological gendered predispositions is downplayed in the extract as discussion of the importance of “nurture” is followed by the reporting of expert evidence that “in the end, organisms which are made up differently tend to react differently”. This statement takes the form of a reality/appearance device (Potter & Wetherell, 1989) in that it enables West to present alternative (socialization) accounts of the cause of gender differences as having only superficial validity, and his own biological account as possessing bottom-line explanatory power.

Through the construction of inherent male and female abilities as obvious and inevitable, West builds the implicit argument that educators and policy makers are implicated in the problem of boys’ attainment ‘disadvantage’; that they have been irresponsible in prioritizing tasks and content they ‘could have known’ would result in gendered achievement consequences. This may be seen most clearly within the statement “Listen to what my colleague says about England: if you give boys these

questions, especially about girls and their feelings, the boys will tend to crash—not all of them but most of them; if you give girls questions about feelings, they will tend to do well”. Within this statement, West builds boys’ inherent inability to deal with this type of assessment as obvious and universal, reference to the findings of his “colleague” in “England” warranting both West’s own case (his opinion is in accord with other world experts) and the global nature of the phenomenon he describes. Moreover, in reporting his colleague’s finding, West establishes the inevitable and extreme nature of boys’ response to “questions about feelings” (a task that may be read as symbolic of the ‘feminization’ of education), as well as positioning teachers/policy makers as responsible for employing biased methods (“if you give boys these questions” they “will tend to crash”). The presentation of boys’ failure in the context of current literacy-rich curriculum and assessment as something that, therefore, ‘could have been expected’ serves both to establish the moral culpability of those who chose to adopt such a focus, and to absolve boys themselves from responsibility for their underperformance. No historical analysis is provided by way of a plausible rationale for the current ‘language emphasis’ (for example, the removal of longstanding barriers to girls’ academic and professional success, or the need to equip all students for an increasingly communication-oriented workforce). Instead, boys’ curriculum and assessment ‘disadvantage’ is decontextualized; historical patterns of gendered oppression are absent in an account where equality is assumed, and violations of this principle (particularly those deemed to be *intentional*) are problematized *a priori*.

In Extract 3, then, it may be seen that an account of the biological basis of gendered learning differences serves to establish as ‘fact’ the notion that male and female

students will almost always display predictable, fixed responses to specific curriculum matter and assessment measures. The construction of boys' and girls' capacities with regard to particular tasks and content as 'inevitably different' works both to allocate blame and to delimit potential means of remedying boys' underachievement problems. The notion that boys have responded 'as would have been expected' to the recently feminized curriculum (i.e., poorly) attests to the immutability of their capacities, as well as to the moral culpability of educators whose methods have failed to accommodate them. Male underperformance becomes evidence that curricular and assessment reform is the only means by which boys' attainment 'disadvantage' may be remedied if boys themselves cannot be changed.

Extract 4 is another account in which educators were positioned as culpable for boys' failure on the grounds that the curricular and assessment options held recently to have 'disadvantaged' boys were employed in full knowledge of their discriminatory potential. Once again, in this extract, the construction of boys' academic weaknesses as obvious and inflexible builds the claim that assessment and curriculum oriented to exposing them has 'set boys up to fail'.

The speaker in Extract 4, Mr Humphreys, appeared before the Committee in a private capacity, but identified himself as a former teacher and juvenile justice officer, currently employed as a social worker in private practice. In this extract, he discusses boys' 'disadvantage' in the context of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), the senior secondary curriculum and examination framework for the state of Victoria.

Extract 4

CHAIR—Can you give the committee more specific examples of educational policies that vilify boys—this was an expression that you used in your submission—and the sort of inappropriate teaching methods as you would see it that have militated against boys achieving their potential?

Mr Humphreys—There are a number of different components to that; I will start first of all by looking at the VCE. When the VCE was introduced it had a number of compulsory components to it like Australian studies, which I certainly found a lot of pupils, particularly boys, did not like. However, the assessment methods in the Year 12 subjects which devolved assessment on home based tasks, on more oral tasks, and more written based tasks were all things that we knew boys were going to do less well at than girls. Combined with their delayed development—it is not delayed, it is a natural development delay compared to girls—there are critical impediments to boys doing well in the Victorian VCE. Many other systems of assessment have gone part the way down that path around Australia, but Victoria seems to have gone the furthest and most complete and, coinciding with the shutting off of access to early vocational education which was the closure of the technical schools, it was a disaster. It not only became more difficult for boys to academically achieve in Victorian schools, but it closed off the early pathways to employment for boys, and some girls too, who were often educationally alienated.

(Melbourne, Vic. 56)

The argument implicit in Extract 3, that boys' poor performance with regard to literacy-based and continuous assessment could (and therefore *should*) have been avoided, is made explicit in Extract 4. Throughout his account, speaker Mr Humphreys positions those responsible for drafting and implementing the Victorian curriculum and assessment framework as having consciously orchestrated boys' academic 'disadvantage'. On the grounds that the limits to boys' capacities are clear and unchanging, Humphreys builds the claim that educators 'could not but have known' the gendered consequences of contemporary content and testing methods prior to their implementation. In turn, evidence of this foreknowledge serves to

position teachers and policy makers as morally culpable with regard to boys' underperformance, and as therefore responsible for its remedy. Once again, reference to any contextualization for the implementation of these problematic methods, or for understanding the historical location of boys' current 'disadvantage', is absent from the account.

At the crux of Extract 4 is the construction of boys' capacities and limitations as facts that can be neither denied nor ignored. This feature of Humphreys' account is clearly evident in his characterization of shifts in the VCE, where he depicts the weight of assessment as having been increasingly placed upon "home based tasks, on more oral tasks, and more written based tasks [which] were all things that we knew boys were going to do less well at than girls". This claim establishes the status of boys' abilities as facts that can be 'known', as evidenced by the predictable nature of their poor performance at present. Further, this statement serves to depict the extent of boys' disadvantage; a three-part list establishes the scope of tasks ("home based", "oral" and "written") currently weighted against boys' natural capacities.

More significant, however, is the notion that boys' likely underachievement on presently emphasized tasks was known *before* the instatement of these procedures. This claim is highly suggestive of intention, and serves to position boys' achievement as having been obstructed by methods designed specifically to exploit their inescapable weaknesses, effectively ruling out the possibility that alternative motivations may have been at play. Against the factual construction of boys' abilities (including their unavoidable "development delay"), changes to curriculum

and assessment are positioned as necessary for the improvement of boys' performance in both practical and moral senses; such alterations are the only means by which educators may rectify a problem they (knowingly) caused if boys themselves 'cannot be changed'.

The construction of 'intention' that is explicitly central to the attribution of moral accountability within Humphreys' account is also bolstered implicitly in Extract 4 through the use of what Marlin (1984) calls 'intention-promoting verbs'. This may be seen initially in the Chair's summary of Humphreys' written submission, (a representation that Humphreys himself does not qualify or deny) in which he reflects back the speaker's categorization of educational practice as having 'vilified' boys and "militated against" their achievement. In contrast to more neutral, alternative categorizations that could have presented these practices as having 'hindered' or 'impeded' boys' success, the verbs 'vilify' and 'militate' may be seen to attribute both agency and intention to the practices held to have impacted upon boys' academic attainment. Likewise, Humphrey's later depiction of other systems of assessment as "shutting off" boys' access to vocational education and as having "closed off" their employment pathways also serves to present these educational methods as having actively brought about boys' current 'disadvantage'. These descriptive selections may be seen to attribute intention to current curriculum and assessment methods and, correspondingly, to those who devised and have employed them. In turn, such a construction works to define who is responsible for rectifying boys' achievement problem (implicated educators), as well as how this might be achieved (through specifically-targeted curricular reform).

Analysis of the repertoire of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ by curriculum and assessment has, up to this point, focused upon two dominant means by which male students were depicted as facing an unjust achievement ‘handicap’. In Extracts 1 and 2, it was shown that factual constructions of gendered capacities served to depict current literacy-rich content and testing as ‘skewed to favour girls’. On the grounds that there is little essential academic merit to justify language-centred methods, it was argued that the benefits of this orientation have been outweighed by its insupportable consequence: boys’ attainment ‘disadvantage’. In Extracts 3 and 4, the construction of male and female (in)abilities was also central, providing a basis for the claim that educators who have employed a literacy emphasis have done so *in full knowledge* of the discriminatory potential of this focus. The notion that teachers and policy makers have ‘set boys up to fail’ through their curricular and assessment choices functioned to depict educators as morally culpable for boys’ achievement ‘disadvantage’ and, in turn, responsible for its remedy.

While the first two extracts focused upon the ‘arbitrariness’ of curricular and assessment priorities that disadvantage boys, and the second two upon educators’ foreknowledge and resultant culpability for this problem, there is a significant feature common to all of the excerpts discussed thus far: the presentation of ‘equality of educational outcomes’ as an abstracted, inviolable moral principle.

In each extract, the absence of reference to the educational or socio-historical context in which boys’ current underachievement may be understood enabled speakers to depict ‘gender-discriminatory methods’ as intolerable *per se*; ‘equality of gendered outcomes’ depicted as the only relevant criterion by which curricular

and assessment choices could be deemed morally supportable. This may be read as a form of what Potter (1996) has called ‘ontological gerrymandering’; a process whereby speakers select as relevant one realm of entities, or set of evaluative criteria, while avoiding others that are rhetorically less advantageous to their case. Through this lens it seems important to revisit the above extracts with a view to identifying both the means by which ‘equality of gendered outcomes’ was selected as the primary measure of educational efficacy, and the potentially relevant argumentative arenas ignored within these accounts.

In Extracts 1 and 2, boys’ ‘disadvantage’ was made salient within accounts that presented the current literacy focus as ‘arbitrary’ and therefore insupportable in its gendered consequences. As discussed in the above analysis, significantly absent from these accounts was any reference to the educational and broader social context in which literacy-rich methods may be seen to be located. No mention was made of the inherent value of the language skills deemed by many to be essential in a globalizing workforce increasingly requiring its workers to possess high-levels of communicative competence (Mahoney, 1998). Likewise, the notion that educational effectiveness might be measured in terms of outcome quality (rather than *equality*) was also absent. Ignored entirely was the possibility that boys’ poor performance in areas held to have intrinsic value might suggest the need for an *increased* focus on (and practice in) these tasks, particularly in light of claims that low-level communication/reflection skills may be related to high levels of suicide and depression amongst young adult men (e.g., Vardon, 1994 as cited by McLean, 1996). In these accounts, the absence of reference to the social location of education ultimately enabled an abstracted version of ‘discriminatory’ curriculum and

assessment to have persuasive force. Against this value-neutral and context-free construction of education, methods held to result in disparate gendered achievement were positioned as necessarily intolerable when judged against the only criterion made relevant: equality of gendered outcomes.

In Extracts 3 and 4, boys' 'disadvantage' was highlighted within accounts that absented the analysis of historical, structural gendered power relations. The notion that the contemporary focus on literacy and continuous assessment has placed boys at an achievement 'handicap' was taken as evidence that such a focus is discriminatory, and therefore insupportable, *per se*. Absent from these accounts was reference to the barriers to girls' educational access and participation argued by some not only to have preceded, but necessitated, the adoption of language-rich methods (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). More significantly, these accounts make no acknowledgement of *ongoing* inequities at a broader social level that have seen the continuing failure of girls' academic success to translate into equal employment options and economic advantage (Foster, 1994). Without reference to the socio-historical context of gender relations in which boys' underachievement may be seen to be located, Extracts 3 and 4 present accounts in which the current symmetry of gendered power is assumed, and the provision of curriculum and assessment by which boys are 'disadvantaged' is positioned as a violation of the taken-for-granted goal of 'gender equity'.

The power of the extracts discussed so far may be seen, therefore, to lie in the gerrymandering of the argumentative terrain; the selection of 'equality of outcome' as the primary means of defining morally-just education equally significant to these

accounts as the potentially relevant alternative criteria that were sidelined and ignored.

Within a repertoire of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ by curriculum and assessment, gerrymandering of this kind was a pervasive feature. Accounts foregrounding intolerance of this ‘gender discrimination’ deflected attention from the socio-historical location of this issue, and of education more generally. Yet, as would be expected, arguments in a wide variety of alternative accounts *did* make mention of the social, historical and broader educational context of boys’ current ‘underachievement’. What is interesting for the purposes of the present analysis, however, is that in a majority of instances, references of this kind were *also* observed within accounts that prioritized the construction of boys as suffering an ‘unacceptable achievement disadvantage’ that requires immediate remedy. The remainder of this chapter will provide an analysis of the structure and function of such accounts.

The section that follows will draw attention to accounts in which reference to the historical oppression of women (specifically, to longstanding barriers to female students’ equal participation in schooling) served ultimately to justify the construction of boys as currently ‘disadvantaged’ by curriculum and assessment. It will be shown that these accounts comprised historical narratives in which the marginalization of female students was constructed as ‘a thing of the past’. Analysis will focus upon the depiction of girls’ current academic success as evidence that feminist efforts to improve female participation and achievement have succeeded, to the extent that the pendulum ‘is now swinging back’. It will be argued that a

metaphor of symmetry was at the crux of arguments in favour of boy-oriented curriculum change equivalent to that introduced as a means of raising girls' success in the early 1980s. It will also be shown that constructions of the current 'equivalence' of gendered power served to deflect attention away from the ongoing (if now less visible) oppression of women within schooling and society.

4.3 Historical narratives and the repertoire of the 'feminization' of the curriculum

A second repertoire identified in the context of accounts linking male underperformance to content and testing was that linking boys' achievement decline to the 'feminization of the curriculum' argued to have taken place over the last two decades. This repertoire worked in conjunction with historical accounts in which it was held that barriers to girls' academic access and achievement have been addressed since the 1980s through targeted provision and curricular reform. In turn, the current success of female students was taken to signal the triumph of such a feminist 'push', and to position a continued focus on girl-friendly methods (literacy-rich tasks, group work, etc.) as unfair and anachronistic now that impediments to girls' achievement have been effectively removed. Within this repertoire, accounts of female disadvantage as a 'thing of the past' enabled a version of what Foster (1994) has called 'presumptive equality', the depiction of boys and girls as socially symmetrical populations currently accessing comparable gendered power and facing comparable gendered oppression. Through this framework, the current underperformance of boys was positioned as an example of 'gender disadvantage' *equivalent* to that faced by girls twenty years ago, and requiring equivalent remedial efforts.

4.3.1 Constructing the 1980s ‘push’ for girls

Extract 5 serves as a brief illustration of accounts in which historical narratives of gender reform presented the marginalization of female students as a problem that has been comprehensively addressed, to the extent that boys have become the ‘new disadvantaged’. Here, teacher Ms Walton provides an account in which current levels of relative gendered attainment are attributed directly to the mid-80s inclusion of additional verbal components within the Curriculum Standards Framework (CSF) for the state of Victoria.

Extract 5

Mrs Walton—What has happened with the girls—and I can only speak for Victoria—is that once the Victorian government, in the mid-1980s, quantified curriculum through the CSFs, and with the study designs, which was a deliberate attempt to put a more verbal base to mathematics and to science, that immediately advantaged girls who previously had for some reason felt disadvantaged, and probably were disadvantaged. If you looked at the upper end you would have found that the way in which a lot of teaching was done in the maths and sciences in particular was directed towards the way boys understood things and so on.

(Ringwood, Vic. 230)

It can be seen that the account developed in Extract 5 provides an unequivocal account of mid-80s feminist interventions as the cause of boys’ current underperformance. Walton’s factual report (“what has happened with the girls”) builds a straightforward, transactional narrative. Within it, female students’ initial ‘disadvantage’ is argued to have been purposefully addressed and effectively reversed, the “deliberate” inclusion of more “verbal” tasks held to have “immediately advantaged girls”. This sequenced explanatory account inexorably links shifting attainment patterns to gender-targeted interventions, and seems a neutral representation of the progress of educational gender reform. Yet the

‘realistic’ appearance of this account may be seen to obfuscate its constructed nature; like all historical reports it may be taken as a ‘version’ in which facts are imbued with meaning through their location within a coherent story (Augoustinos, 2001).

The authoritative, familiar nature of the story built up in Extract 5 is established through the use of alternately vague and specific descriptions. The excerpt begins with a detailed account of girl-oriented curricular shifts in which the location, date and site of these changes are all clearly defined (“the Victorian government, in the mid-1980s, quantified curriculum through the CSFs, and with the study designs, which was a deliberate attempt to put a more verbal base to mathematics and to science”). Yet the specificity in the description of the action taken on girls’ behalf is in contrast to the vague presentation of the reasons legitimating such gendered interventions. The speaker provides a very general gloss on the barriers to girls’ attainment that justified the shift in emphasis toward more verbal tasks, explaining that such changes were instated because girls “had previously for some reason felt disadvantaged and probably were disadvantaged”. This gloss makes room for the possibility that female students’ concerns were unwarranted or exaggerated (through the absence of a clear “reason” for their claims of disadvantage), yet is vague enough to avoid criticism for ‘denying the existence’ of the problems girls have faced. Where Walton does refer more specifically to earlier obstacles to girls’ success (“If you looked at the upper end you would have found that the way in which a lot of teaching was done in the maths and sciences in particular was directed towards the way boys understood things and so on”), detail is still omitted,

in that she employs the generalized list-completer “and so on” rather than making explicit further examples of past impediments to girls’ success.

The balance between vague description and fine detail within Extract 5 may be seen to play a significant role in the establishment of this authoritative historical narrative. The contrast between the speaker’s non-specific depiction of the academic barriers to female students’ success and her detailed account of the changes instated in order to remove them suggests that the (limited) disadvantage once experienced by girls has been comprehensively addressed, if not entirely outweighed. It may be plausibly argued that “a deliberate attempt to put a more verbal base to mathematics and to science” by way of adjustments to official curricular frameworks (“CSFs”) represents an overzealous response to the non-specific disadvantage “felt” by girls and only “probably” substantiated. On these grounds, Walton’s vague claim that girls’ previous “disadvantage” has been replaced by their current “advantage” requires no further evidence, and may be read as the logical consequence of conscious and thorough efforts to improve girls’ success.

As Potter (1996) has argued, detailed descriptions can be used to establish a speaker’s category entitlement, the presentation of particulars testament to the speaker’s status as an informed and credible witness to the action or events described. At the same time, he argues, detailed accounts may open a speaker’s claims to challenge or critique; specific elements of a description may allow recipients to identify inconsistencies or to reformulate the details provided into an equally (or more) plausible alternative account. Vague descriptions, on the other hand, may be challenged as lacking in evidence, yet can serve to establish credible

accounts *as a result* of their non-specificity. Potter explains that the absence of detail in broad, formulaic accounts enables descriptions to sustain an action or evaluation, without opening them to specific critical scrutiny.

Through such a rhetorical lens, it appears that the deployment of detail and vagueness in Extract 5 does not simply serve a contrastive function in positioning boys' current underperformance as the result of educational 'overcompensation' for girls' previous disadvantage. Rather, the detailed description of "what has happened with the girls" provides sufficient specific evidence to build the credibility of a more vague central claim: that girls' disadvantage has been entirely overcome now that feminist interventions have reversed previous patterns of gendered achievement. The speaker's version therefore appears a realistic reflection of historical fact; her account is grounded in evidence (which establishes her access to the 'reality' of the events she describes, as well as her right to interpret them), yet is vague enough to withstand specific critical attack. Ultimately, this balance permits Walton to present as fact a version of educational gender reform in which girls' underachievement is held to have been acknowledged, addressed and eventually inverted to the end that boys are now the 'disadvantaged gender'. The organisation of the details she provides into this coherent, historical narrative (X, addressed by Y, led to Z) adds further weight to the plausibility of her description; the isolation of a 'cause' of the observed shift in male-female attainment levels (the 1980s 'push' for girls) becomes a necessary feature of such a sequenced, retrospective explanatory account.

Extract 5 represents a particularly concise illustration of the ‘standard story’ of educational gender reform in Australia identified throughout the corpus. As such, a fine-grained analysis of this extract has been provided, drawing attention to the constructed nature of this historical account. Of particular interest was the depiction of the 1980s ‘push’ for girls as the direct cause of boys’ current underachievement, and of this shift in relative attainment as unproblematic evidence that barriers to girls’ academic achievement have been effectively, and entirely, removed.

In contrast to the examples discussed so far, Extract 5’s construction of boys’ current curricular/assessment ‘disadvantage’ was not achieved through an account that absented the historical context of educational gender inequalities. Rather, the acknowledgement of longstanding barriers to girls’ achievement was central to Extract 5, facilitating a chronological narrative of gender reform that appeared both informed and impartial. Yet this acknowledgement was deployed within a rhetorical context in which the very mention of *past* impediments to girls’ success served to refute the *contemporary* relevance of concern about female students’ academic access and performance. Indeed, in Extract 5, reference to the necessity of 1980s efforts to improve girls’ attainment appeared only when the legitimacy of continued efforts on behalf of girls was denied, and female disadvantage was held to have been successfully ‘reversed’. As such, the moral salience of the problem of boys’ current ‘disadvantage’ could still be prioritized, in spite of Walton’s allusion to the historical discrimination girls have faced, on the grounds that ‘that was then, and this is now’.

Extract 6, below, is a further example of the dominant narrative of educational gender reform in Australia. In this extract, boys' current underperformance is once again argued to be a direct consequence of the 'girl-friendly' remodeling of academic content and testing held to have occurred over the past two decades. The alternate deployment of detail and vagueness serves, in teacher Mrs Nicholls' account, to present feminist interventions into curriculum and assessment as having achieved, and then overstepped, their original goal of equality.

Extract 6

Mrs Nicholls—One of the things I have noticed is that certainly with the senior curriculum it is very language intense. If we go back to, let's say in South Australia, the physics course, because girls were seen to be underachieving in physics, the physics exam and the structure of the physics course was changed to make it more appropriate for girls. This meant an extended response question was put in, the multiple choice questions were taken out; more problem solving, more literacy type skills required in the physics exam. We have seen this shift now. The girls are achieving better but the boys are dropping, because they are actually having to write extended writing in physics and chemistry. All of the exams now, except for maths 1 and 2, have an extended prose section. Many of the boys find that difficult. They cannot use, in South Australia, a word processor in the exam unless they have special provision, so it means that in the analytical side of things, the mathematical side, the problem solving side, they are not able to demonstrate those skills as well as they could 20 years ago in the older courses. But girls are achieving better, so we have that interesting change there.

(Adelaide, S.A. 842)

The chronological narrative evident in Extract 6 serves, once again, to present boys' current underachievement as the direct result of institutionalized efforts to 'feminize' assessment and curriculum. Within it, the proliferation of 'girl-friendly', language-rich methods is held to have led to boys' performance decline via an unproblematic process of cause and effect. Positioning the remodeling of subject

physics as a prototypical example (“let’s say, in South Australia, the physics course...”), the speaker builds an account of gender reform in which girls’ disadvantage is held to have been identified (“girls were seen to be underachieving in physics”), addressed (“the structure of the physics course was changed to make it more appropriate for girls”) and, eventually, overturned (“We have seen this shift now. The girls are achieving better but the boys are dropping”).

Although an ostensibly impartial historical narrative (Nicholls presents the shift towards literacy and its effects as something she has simply “noticed”), this central story does important definitional and attributional work to frame the way in which the cause of boys’ ‘disadvantage’ may be identified, and its effects assessed. As was observed in Extract 5, this is achieved through the contrasting deployment of vague and detailed descriptions within the authoritative structure of a sequenced explanatory account.

The narrative of Extract 6 begins with an acknowledgement of the curricular disadvantage female students once faced (“If we go back...girls were seen to be underachieving in physics”). This general gloss works both to undermine the severity of impediments to girls’ success (no detail substantiates girls’ ‘perceived’ disadvantage) and to locate them firmly within the past. From there, the speaker provides a much more detailed account of efforts to redress gender-discriminatory practices, highlighting the extremity and scope of ‘girl-friendly’ curricular shifts (“an extended response question was put in, the multiple choice questions were taken out; more problem solving, more literacy type skills required in the final exam”).

As was the case in the previous extract, in Extract 6 the balance of formulaic and specific descriptions serves a number of functions to establish the authority of the narrative presented. Firstly, a detail-rich depiction of feminist curriculum re-modeling builds the speaker's credibility as an informed, reliable witness to the historical shift she describes. Her exhaustive list of girl-friendly adjustments to the physics curriculum establishes Nicholls' access to the 'facts' of educational gender reform, and gives credence to her identification of the 'literacy push' as relevant to discussion of boys' underachievement. More significantly, the contrast between Nicholls' detailed list of changes and the vague depiction of the problem they aimed to remedy ("girls were seen to be underachieving"), works to position the disadvantage of female students as having been entirely 'outweighed' by girl-friendly interventions. This construction bolsters Nicholls' initially implicit contention that *boys* now face educational disadvantage; the depiction of feminist efforts to raise girls' achievement as 'over-compensatory' necessarily positions these efforts as having passed their goal of 'equality'.

It is evident that the contrasting use of detail and vagueness allows the speaker to make attributions of blame and causality, throughout Extract 6, in a manner that obscures her own interpretative role. Rather than explicitly labelling pervasive, girl-friendly literacy as the 'cause' of boys' underachievement, her weighted descriptions *imply* this relationship without compromising the neutrality of her report. This lack of visible interpretation heightens the authority of Nicholls' account in that the 'facts' she presents seem to 'speak for themselves' as a result of their location within a coherent, plausible narrative. As a result, when she

eventually *does* make explicit the link between literacy and boys' poor performance towards the end of the extract ("the girls are achieving better but the boys are dropping, because they are actually having to write extended writing"), the apparent inevitability of this conclusion downplays Nicholls' stake in this interpretation, and maintains the facticity of her 'impartial' report.

Extract 6 demonstrates, once again, that accounts of boys' academic disadvantage did not exclusively rely on the absence of discussion about historical barriers to female students' attainment. Indeed, reference to the discrimination girls 'once faced' is central to the establishment of Nicholls' narrative as an impartial and accurate reflection of the progression of gender reform. Yet it may be seen that the particular *version* of female disadvantage presented (a disadvantage evidenced by 'gender-inappropriate' curriculum and correspondingly poor 'results') is one that undermines the current relevance of concern about girls' participation and achievement. These gerrymandered 'disadvantage criteria' enable Nicholls to acknowledge the inequities female students once faced while simultaneously denying their continued existence; girls' current, relative success is positioned as confirmation that their prior disadvantage has been replaced by that of boys.

It seems clear then, that the salience of boys' educational disadvantage could be maintained as a result, rather than in spite, of an acknowledgement of historical impediments to girls' academic achievement. In Extract 6, reference to the past inequalities that girls encountered, in conjunction with the construction of boys and girls as competing populations with discrete capacities, served to position accepted shifts in gendered attainment as proof that patterns of advantage have been

'reversed'. Significantly, these definitional constructions may be seen to perform an additional function within this extract, working not only to position boys as disadvantaged, but to depict their disadvantage as being *of the same order* as that previously experienced by girls. Through the gerrymandering of the 'nature' of gendered capacities as well as what may be seen to 'count' as disadvantage, Nicholls' narrative serves to define boys' underachievement as the result of academic impediments *equivalent* to those facing girls prior to the 1980s, and as warranting equivalent remedial efforts.

In the course of Extract 6, the capacities of male and female students are defined as discrete (for example, writing "extended prose" suits girls but is "difficult" for many boys), enabling the speaker to depict curricular shifts towards literacy as having had obvious and opposite effects on male versus female students ("the girls are achieving better but the boys are dropping"). This depiction of polarized gendered abilities works to position male and female students as competing populations, and to define practices that 'suit' one gender as inevitably detrimental to the other. In turn, successful efforts to make the curriculum more suitable for girls are necessarily held to have had an inverse effect on male students. Nicholls' acknowledgement that physics has not always been "appropriate" for girls, and that efforts to redress this imbalance were therefore warranted, does not present the removal of such barriers as a sufficient means of realizing gender equity. Rather, it serves to mandate *equivalent* interventions on behalf of present-day boys for whom the current literacy emphasis is deemed equally 'inadequate'.

The construction of boys' and girls' 'mirror abilities' provides a further justification for interventions on behalf of male students: on the grounds that male and female students have opposite capabilities, it follows that the recent emphasis on girls' 'learning styles' may have blocked the manifestation of boys' specific learning strengths. Indeed, Nicholls' categorization of gendered abilities as occupying different "sides" of the academic spectrum presents efforts for girls that foreground literacy as having undermined half the range of valued educational outcomes. This is evident in her assertion that the girl-friendly "extended prose section" now present in almost all exams "means that in the analytical side of things, the mathematical side, the problem solving side, (boys) are not able to demonstrate those skills as well as they could 20 years ago in the older courses. But girls are achieving better, so we have that interesting change there". Central to this claim is the notion that female students' current success is simply an unearned effect of shifting curricular emphases. Girls' achievement is not held to reflect the removal of impediments to their attainment, but an unjustifiable weighting in their favour through which a valued range of educational outcomes (associated primarily with the strengths of boys) are simply being missed. Interventions on behalf of male students are therefore implicitly justified as a means, not only of righting the curricular weighting in terms of gender suitability, but of re-balancing curriculum and assessment so that students learn, and may demonstrate, the skills associated with a well-rounded education.

In Extract 6, the speaker's historical narrative, by way of contrastingly vague and detailed descriptions, builds an account of boys' underachievement as proof that girls' disadvantage has been wholly reversed by feminist curricular adjustments.

Although a purportedly neutral reflection of fact, the construction of Nicholls' version of 'disadvantage' and of inherent gendered capacities serves to locate barriers to girls' success within the past, and to suggest that boys' underachievement is evidence that (continuing) efforts to remove them have simply gone too far. Moreover, through the gerrymandering of 'disadvantage criteria' to include only relative underperformance and gender-inappropriate curriculum, this account functions implicitly to justify 'boy-friendly' curricular shifts on the grounds that male students' current disadvantage is *equivalent* to that once faced by girls. This notion of 'equivalence' will be discussed further in the section that follows, in which the repertoire of the feminization of the curriculum is used to argue that the pendulum of educational discrimination is now 'swinging back'.

4.3.2 'Pendulum accounts': metaphors of symmetry in narratives of curricular feminization

As has already been demonstrated, within a repertoire linking boys' underperformance to feminist curriculum remodeling, many speakers depicted girl-friendly methods as having 'overshot' their goal of gender equality to the extent that *boys* now experience educational hardship. As was the case in the previous extract, a significant feature of many such accounts was the deployment of metaphors of imbalance. These metaphors depicted interventions aimed at improving girls' results as having 'tipped the scales' of achievement by weighting the curriculum in favour of girls' 'side' of the spectrum of abilities.

In many of the extracts discussed so far, imbalance metaphors served simply to establish the existence of boys' disadvantage. In others, such as Extract 6 above, they worked to construct the nature of this disadvantage as equivalently grave and

morally insupportable as that faced by girls prior to the feminist interventions of the 1980s. A particularly salient metaphor in this regard was that of the pendulum, an image that enabled the acknowledgement of historical female disadvantage, and the warranting of efforts to redress this problem, to define both the cause of boys' underperformance (the 'push' towards girl-friendly curriculum and assessment) and a blueprint for restoring gender 'equilibrium' (equivalent *boy-friendly* interventions). This argumentative process is mobilized by teacher Mrs Russell in Extract 7, below.

Extract 7

Mrs Russell—I am interested in your comment about the feminizing of the curriculum because I worked for a long time in a girls' school where we were struggling to get girls to get twenties and get through into engineering and all of those sorts of subjects. I guess that was in the eighties, when we broke through that kind of barrier that had been perceived to be there to girls. I guess it would be quite true. I would concur with the view that there has been in the past a push to make girls more successful, and it may have swung around to the point where it has been done in a way that boys are not able to feel comfortable with some aspects of the curriculum.

(*Evanston South, S.A. 812*)

In Extract 7, a version of the 'standard story' of gender reform (feminist efforts "broke through" barriers to girls' achievement and, in doing so, created impediments for boys) attracts a heightened credibility owing to the speaker's status as an agentic member of the project she describes. Whereas speakers in the previous extracts established the facticity of their accounts by positioning themselves as witnesses to feminist curricular restructuring, Russell's identification as a *participant* within this process ("we were struggling to get girls to get twenties...we broke through that kind of barrier") secures additional authority. Her active role not only establishes her access to the facts of gender reform (entitling her

to define “the eighties” as the period in which impediments to girls’ success were ‘broken through’) but downplays her stake in the account she provides of it. Rather than a partial ‘boys advocate’ she presents a feminist educator from whom an account of boys’ disadvantage would be improbable without substantial evidence that girls’ problems have been effectively ameliorated. In addition, this speaker’s feminist identification positions her critique of some girl-friendly interventions (“it may have swung around to the point where it has been done in a way that boys are not able to feel comfortable with some aspects of the curriculum”) as an acknowledgement from ‘someone who should know’; if she did not so identify, this criticism could be undermined as an attempt to pass the buck with regard to responsibility for boys’ underachievement ‘problem’.

Indeed, the central importance of Russell’s feminist self-depiction may also explain the hedging that is pervasive throughout her account. The abundant use of qualifiers (“I guess that was in the eighties, when we broke through that kind of barrier...I guess it would be quite true...it may have swung around to the point where...boys are not able to feel comfortable with some aspects of the curriculum”) may be seen, not only as an orientation to the cultural salience of ‘politically correct’ accounting, but as a means of presenting boys’ current disadvantage whilst endeavouring to sustain the feminist identity in which her claims are grounded.

Ultimately, this first-hand, moderate account in which the speaker’s interest appears to be declared supports a ‘pendulum’ construction of educational gender reform (“I would concur with the view that there has been in the past a push to make girls more successful, and it may have swung around to the point where it has been done

in a way that boys are not able to feel comfortable with some of the aspects of the curriculum”). This metaphor comprises several elements which combine to build a picture of the cause, and potential solution, of boys’ underachievement ‘problem’: the notion that girls were given an initial “push” to accelerate their achievement, the concept that equilibrium has now been passed (things have “swung around”), and the idea that balance will only be restored when equivalent weight is applied to the ‘other side of the spectrum’ (the current concerns of boys). Although this logic remains implicit within Extract 7, the image of a pendulum and its properties provides scope for inference; as Gastil (1992) has argued, metaphors of this kind allow speakers to imply meanings without the need to express them directly.

Potter (1996) explains that “metaphor is often considered as an area where descriptions are being used performatively” (p.180). The inferences associated with metaphors, he explains, may be seen to construct the nature of the thing they describe so as to highlight certain features and downplay others; elements that do not fit with the image provided become subsumed into the ‘figurability’ of a metaphorical account. In Extract 7, a feature of Russell’s narrative of gender reform made salient through the use of the pendulum metaphor is the notion that, just as a pendulum has two symmetrical sides of mirror-equivalence, boys and girls represent symmetrical populations whose needs and capacities are, likewise, *opposite but equivalent*.

Through her claim that the past “push to make girls more successful” has “swung around” to the point that “boys are not able to feel comfortable with some aspects of the curriculum”, the speaker establishes both this sense of gender-symmetry, and

the notion that the abilities of boys versus girls may be contrastingly 'suited' or 'impeded' by particular academic content and assessment. This construction sets up male and female students as competing populations, and positions efforts to raise the achievement of one group as necessarily detrimental to the other. Against this background, Russell's narrative of gender reform seems all the more plausible; boys' achievement decline appears the natural corollary of 'girl-friendly' interventions.

The pendulum metaphor in Extract 7 not only serves to establish the facticity of boys' disadvantage, but also works qualitatively to define the nature and cause of this 'achievement handicap'. Where girls' current 'success' could have been held to reflect the removal of curricular barriers to their achievement and the restoration of gender equilibrium, the implication of pendulum properties (the "push" for girls has seen patterns of discrimination 'swing around') suggests instead that the point of equality has now been *passed*. Girls' achievement, like boys' underperformance, is taken to be an unearned consequence of the "push" by feminist educators ("we were struggling to get girls to get twenties...we broke through that kind of barrier) the momentum of which has shifted the weighting by which each gender is 'favoured' by assessment and curriculum. More significantly, the pendulum image and its connotations of gender symmetry depicts efforts for girls as having 'gone too far' - to the point where boys' current 'alienation' may be seen to mirror that previously experienced by girls. In turn, the disparate gendered obstacles Russell recounts (barriers to girls' achievement of "twenties" and access into high-status subjects, as opposed to boys' inability to "feel comfortable with some aspects of the curriculum") are positioned as equivalent, and methods for the alleviation of girls'

'disadvantage' are positioned implicitly as a blueprint for addressing that now faced by boys.

As the analysis of Extract 7 has illustrated, reference to the historical marginalization of female students could provide critical argumentative leverage within accounts establishing boys' current 'disadvantage' through the use of a pendulum metaphor. The construction of boys and girls as competing populations with polarized needs and capacities enabled pendulum accounts to position efforts for girls (however well warranted) as having necessarily 'impeded' the achievement of boys. Through connotations of symmetry, the pendulum image served to locate the (acknowledged) disadvantage of girls securely within the past, boys' current underperformance taken as proof that the feminist 'push' for girls has replaced female alienation with *equivalent* discrimination against boys. Moreover, this metaphor depicted as ideal an abstracted version of equality ('equilibrium') divorced from the political and social nexus in which questions about gender disadvantage may be seen to exist. Along a one-dimensional spectrum, discussion of discrimination was reduced to a question of 'who has done what for whom' in education, and the success of feminist interventions was established as the precedent governing the appropriate response to boys' present-day underperformance.

The role of the pendulum metaphor in the gerrymandering of educational disadvantage criteria is also evident in Extract 8, below. Within this more explicit pendulum account, the notion of gender symmetry is taken a step further, serving to legitimate boy-friendly curriculum adjustment as a means, not only of removing

obstacles to boys' success created by the feminist literacy 'push', but of enabling boys' 'side' of the spectrum of abilities to manifest in the form of achievement.

Extract 8

Mr Burchnall—Two things: one of the reasons why boys are now being outperformed by girls generally is that there has been over the past 20 years considerable emphasis on the needs of girls. Your inquiry shows that the pendulum is now swinging back towards concern for the needs of boys, but I think very successfully, too, there has been addressing of the needs of girls.

Dr Webber—I agree with that wholeheartedly. That has been one of the factors. Dr Barry McGaw, who is head of ACER, recently commented that the shift in the outcomes of the year 12 level would continue to favour girls because of the language skills and the shift to the language emphasis, if you like, in testing, which is reflected in the comments Bronte has made earlier. That is a big reason for the shift in computers—

Mr Burchnall—Can I mention something related to that, and that is that there has been in the last 20 years a move towards different forms of assessment, and much more emphasis on internal assessment, the number of tasks, meeting deadlines, being very organized, rather than the final exam on which everything is based. I have to say this style of learning and assessment does favour girls or seems to favour girls more than boys, and they tend to be better organized, they tend to plan ahead better and meet those deadlines. Boys are a little bit more rumbustious and the skills of planning ahead and meeting deadlines for an adolescent boy is a pretty difficult thing to achieve.

(Adelaide, S.A. 844)

In Extract 8, Adelaide teachers Mr Burchnall and Mr Webber construct a consensual narrative of the history of gender reform in which boys' underperformance is unequivocally linked to educational 'feminization'. From the outset, Burchnall explicitly attributes boys' declining achievement to the recent foregrounding of female students' needs, highlighting the length and breadth of this focus ("one of the reasons why boys are now being outperformed by girls generally is that there has been over the past 20 years considerable emphasis on the needs of girls"). The deployment of a pendulum metaphor then bolsters this connection by positioning

the Inquiry itself as proof that feminist efforts have overstepped their goals (“Your inquiry shows that the pendulum is now swinging back towards concern for the needs of boys, but I think very successfully, too, there has been addressing the needs of girls”). While this account goes further than others examined so far in presenting feminist interventions as the cause of boys’ underperformance, the use of nominalization within it suggests an orientation to the sensitive nature of such a claim within a context of dominant political correctness. In explaining that boys’ achievement decline reflects a 20-year “emphasis on the needs of girls” and “addressing of the needs of girls”, Burchnell’s nominalized constructions categorize this focus as a general orientation rather than the fault of specific (i.e., feminist) educators. Nonetheless, the causal attribution is clear; this symmetrical account positioning girls’ “out-performance” of boys as evidence that the feminist reform project has been successfully (if overzealously) completed.

The significance of the pendulum metaphor in building gender-equivalence is, once again, apparent in Extract 8. This image is central to the construction of gendered needs and capacities as distinct ‘sides’ of an academic spectrum; the notion that the “emphasis on the needs of girls” is “swinging back towards concern for the needs of boys” depicts the requirements and capacities of these two populations as both opposite and discrete. In addition, the pendulum metaphor enables the accepted ‘emphasis on girls’ to imply a corresponding *under*-emphasis on the learning needs of boys that makes the link between feminist efforts and boys’ achievement decline all the more plausible. The possibility that boys could also have benefited from (girl-oriented) literacy-rich initiatives is entirely absented. Through the construction of a power-neutral gendered spectrum on which male and female students represent

opposing poles, Burchnall reduces discussion of academic disadvantage to a question of how much has been done, and for whom. The lack of political contextualization of feminist efforts to improve girls' success (a rationale for the initial "emphasis" on girls remains unexplained), in conjunction with a pendulum account of gender equivalence, serves to position "shifts" in attainment as the simple consequence of "shifts" in attention, a circumstance logically remediable by 'turning the focus back'.

The pendulum image in Extract 8 also justifies the provision of boy-oriented interventions on the grounds that the 'imbalance' brought about by the girl-friendly emphasis is tantamount to 'favouritism'. Against the factual construction of opposing male and female capacities (both Burchnall and Weber describe the focus on literacy and continuous assessment as suited to girls' inherent strengths), the one-sided emphasis the speakers describe appears patently 'skewed'. The presentation of an exhaustive list of the ways in which schooling has shifted to meet girls' needs ("a move towards different forms of assessment, the number of tasks, meeting deadlines, being very organized, rather than the final exam on which everything is based") supports the notion established by both speakers via the use of pendulum logic: that girls are currently "favoured" by curriculum and assessment, while boys face parallel 'impediments' (e.g., "the shift in the outcomes of the year 12 level [will] continue to favour girls because of the language skills").

The categorization of this 'imbalance' in terms of 'favouritism' may be seen to serve a variety of important functions within Extract 8. Firstly, it works to downgrade girls' success, presenting it (and boys' underachievement) as entirely

undeserved. Within a pendulum account, ‘unjustified imbalance’ and ‘gender discrimination’ are conflated (both are deviations from the ideal of ‘equilibrium’), and thus remedial efforts for boys become positioned as a means of restoring ‘fairness’ and ‘equality’.

Secondly, the connotations of ‘unfairness’ within the construction of girls as “favoured” suggest that, in ‘suiting’ girls’ capacities, curriculum and assessment are undermining another realm of potentially valuable abilities. This implication is apparent at the end of Extract 8, where Burchnall argues that the contemporary “style of learning” emphasizing continuous assessment “rather than the final exam on which everything is based” seems to “favour girls”. Within this statement, exam-based and continuous methods of assessment are presented as equally viable means of evaluating learning outcomes; Burchnall’s neutral description of the “move” in emphasis from one to the other absents a clear rationale for this shift in terms of increased educational benefits. Once the arbitrariness of the current emphasis on internal, continuous assessment is established, it is presented as unjustifiable on two distinct grounds. Not only is such a focus depicted, through this pendulum account, as insupportably ‘gender-biased’, it is also positioned as foregrounding the accomplishment of one set of skills (the long-term planning and organisation required for continuous assessment) at the expense of another (the quick recall and decision-making required within exams). In turn, a (boy-friendly) ‘re-weighting’ of assessment emphases is warranted as a means of ensuring that students acquire a range of skills consistent with a balanced education, *and* as a route to removing ‘gender biases’.

Finally, the construction of girls as ‘favoured’ by contemporary testing procedures may be seen to suggest that their success, and boys’ failure, is an illusory assessment-effect rather than an accurate reflection of disproportionate content mastery. This is evident towards the end of Extract 8, where Burchnall builds an implicit distinction between the procedural skills associated with specific testing methods, and the actual content knowledge they should ideally seek to measure. Through his claim that girls have been ‘favoured’ by the 20-year move from assessment emphasizing a “final exam on which everything is based” to “internal assessment...meeting deadlines, being very organized”, Burchnall suggests that it is the gender-suitability of evaluation measures, rather than knowledge and skill acquisition, that has shifted during this period. The fact that boys have shown contrasting levels of success on two types of assessment ostensibly designed to evaluate the same learning outcomes serves to indicate inbuilt error, implying that achievement results conflate gendered capacity (e.g., inherent “planning” ability) with genuine attainment (e.g., conceptual mastery). Correspondingly, through the established pendulum construction of gender-symmetry, girls’ achievement is positioned as exaggerated, and boys’ as diminished, by systematically skewed (although purportedly neutral) assessment practices.

In this sense, not only is ‘girl-oriented’ assessment depicted as failing to offer students the chance to acquire a broad range of skills, but it is also positioned as gender-discriminatory in its provision of opportunities to *demonstrate* knowledge and skill acquisition. Boys’ achievement, the visibility of which was once facilitated by ‘boy-friendly’ assessment such as exams, is now argued to have been ‘obscured’, while girls’ opportunities to ‘reveal’ their knowledge are held to have been

enhanced. On these grounds, a shift in the focus of assessment back to 'boy-oriented' methods may be justified as a means of more 'accurately' reflecting girls' achievement, and of facilitating the demonstration of boys' (unquestioned) knowledge such that their learning may be 'more fairly' recognized and recorded as achievement.

Analysis of Extract 8 has demonstrated that the use of a pendulum metaphor within accounts of educational 'feminization' could serve to advocate boy-friendly interventions on two primary grounds. Firstly, the pendulum connotation of gender symmetry and equivalence served to present feminist interventions on behalf of girls as having been necessarily detrimental to male students. Without political contextualization, the pendulum image served to depict boys' needs as 'equal but opposite' to those of girls, and to position male students' current underperformance as evidence that boys have replaced girls as the gender whose needs must now be addressed.

In addition to positioning boy-friendly interventions as a means of 'evening up' the attention paid to gendered learning *needs*, the pendulum image also presented such efforts as necessary if schools are to allow the equitable manifestation of gendered learning *abilities*. Through the depiction of boys and girls' inherent capacities as reflecting opposite sides of the academic spectrum, 'girl-friendly' assessment (focusing upon continuous evaluation and planning) was constructed as failing to make room for the acquisition of a balanced range of academic skills. More significantly, this focus was argued to exaggerate girls' success, and boys' failure, by conflating content knowledge with the demonstration of the procedural skills

now pervasively required – skills argued to be associated with inherent female strengths. In turn, the implication was established that contemporary assessment should be rectified, not only so that girls' achievement may be 'accurately' reflected, but in order that boys may be given an equal opportunity to *demonstrate* the knowledge and skills they have attained.

4.4 Discussion

This chapter has investigated accounts of the 'feminization of curriculum and assessment' as to blame for boys' underachievement.

Once again, the intention of the analysis presented was not to argue that it is unhelpful to evaluate the role of curricular/assessment frameworks in terms of the production and maintenance of educational inequalities. As was discussed in the introduction to this chapter, skills associated with dominant (masculine, white, middle-class, heterosexual) category memberships have historically been rewarded by certain curricular emphases, a process that has served to confirm a 'natural order of privilege' (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Therefore, it seems imperative that content and testing practices continually be evaluated with regard to their role in reproducing and exacerbating social inequities in 'neutral' educational terms.

Likewise, it was not the aim of this chapter to argue that there are *no* problems in terms of boys' connection with contemporary curriculum and modes of assessment, or that boys themselves should be held solely responsible for improving their engagement with the methods on offer. Certainly, as was highlighted in the introduction and reiterated throughout the analysis, it seems that there *is* an

observable friction between the successful performance of schoolboy masculinity and effective engagement with the literacy and continuous assessment skills now pervasively required at school. Indeed, boys may be seen to be positioned by family, peer and cultural versions of masculinity often incompatible with those expected in the classroom, a circumstance constraining their options for effective, and acceptable, educational connection. Yet, it has been argued that educational reform efforts taking dominant masculine forms as indicative of 'boys' nature' risk reproducing these tensions – re-establishing as natural a hegemonic masculinity at odds with behaviours required for successful academic engagement. As such, the purpose of the analysis was to explore accounts of curriculum/assessment as 'to blame' for boys' underperformance in terms of the assumptions about boys they work to 'naturalize', and the potential consequences of the educational interventions they serve to justify. Two pervasive interpretative repertoires were identified in this regard.

The first repertoire identified was that which positioned boys as 'disadvantaged' by curriculum and assessment. In accounts of this kind, contemporary content and testing methods were depicted as 'to blame' for boys' underperformance, not as a result of their failure to address boys' learning *needs*, but because of their inadequacies in accommodating boys' innate, gendered *capacities*. This repertoire was grounded in the notion that boys and girls possess distinct academic aptitudes that certain curricular emphases could be skewed either towards or against. Within it, boys were positioned as 'disadvantaged' by the current cross-curricular focus on literacy skills and continuous assessment argued to be 'at odds' with their natural capacities, yet 'suited to' the innate strengths of girls.

Accounts of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ by content and testing were shown to function in two main ways to establish boy-oriented curriculum reform as an educational, and moral, necessity. In Extracts 1 and 2, the (essentialized) construction of gendered capacities worked in conjunction with metaphors of curricular fit/non-fit and balance/imbalance to establish performance differentials as the result of methods that have placed boys at an ‘achievement handicap’, while ‘giving’ girls their success. These accounts depicted curricular emphases (in particular, the current literacy focus) as arbitrary, a construction that functioned to present methods ‘favouring’ either gender as morally *and* educationally insupportable. Without academic justification, content and testing skewed towards girls was held to represent a serious gendered inequity, and to result in outcomes unrelated to genuine (unaided) attainment. In turn, curricular reform aimed at redressing boys’ disadvantage was established as a means, not only of correcting an injustice, but of getting the results *right*.

In Extracts 3 and 4, the repertoire of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ served to depict curriculum and assessment as having ‘set boys up to fail’. In these accounts, constructions of boys’ innate capacities (particularly their literacy ‘inability’) as obvious and immutable worked to build the notion that boys’ underperformance with regard to literacy-rich curriculum *could* have been predicted and therefore *should* have been avoided. In these accounts, teachers and policy makers were depicted as having emphasized girl-friendly methods *in full knowledge* of their discriminatory potential, and were therefore held responsible for redressing this inequity.

Throughout each of these accounts, the ‘naturalization’ of boys’ inability to connect with literacy learning was a pervasive, taken-for-granted feature. Likewise, the ‘feminized’ nature of all aspects of literacy was attributed factual status. Against the inflexibility of these gendered capacities, curricular reform was positioned as the only option for improving boys’ rates of success, and ensuring that equitable outcomes (taken, a priori, as a central aim of schooling) might be effectively achieved.

Yet, on the basis of the analysis and introduction to this chapter, it seems that efforts to address male students’ disconnection from literacy that *presuppose* male inability in this area risk reproducing existing academic tensions for boys. The naturalization of an incompatibility between boys and language-rich content appeared, in the extracts presented, to legitimate interventions aimed towards either *reducing* the current literacy emphasis, or *re-masculinizing* the way in which literacy skills are taught and assessed. Such interventions would obviously have detrimental consequences for girls, but would also reaffirm the limited options for literacy engagement available to boys – reproducing existing constraints on their capacity to engage in critical citizenship, and (potentially) their employability in the emerging ‘information age’. As long as literacy is defined as inherently feminine, and dominant versions of masculinity (grounded in rejection of the feminine) are naturalized and accommodated by curriculum and assessment, it seems a tension will be evident between the performance of schoolboy masculinity and engagement with literacy learning. Where essentialized constructions of ‘what it is to be a boy’ are the basis of reform, it seems that the curriculum will continue to define and limit

boys' options in terms of taking up a classroom positioning that is both 'appropriately masculine' and 'academically engaged'.

The construction of boy-oriented curriculum reform as an 'equity intervention' that was evident throughout the extracts may also be seen to obscure the friction between literacy and masculinity, and to abstract concerns about boys' underperformance in this area from their political location. As was discussed in the introduction to this chapter, hegemonic versions of masculinity are powerful discourses with which to be aligned; for boys, such practices may serve as a defense against being 'gay', and work to support a natural connection with subject areas (such as mathematics and science) that have considerable vocational leverage. As Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) have argued, given that hegemonic masculinity is such an *enabling* discourse, "it is difficult to see why boys would willingly give up its strengths for the less attractive and less powerful discourses of literature and literacy" (p.215). From this perspective, the claim that boys' underachievement in literacy is an 'equity concern necessitating curricular reform' requires careful consideration, particularly in light of the finding that girls' success within literacy-rich curricula *does not* automatically translate into success at tertiary or workplace levels – *even in* language-based professions (Kenway & Willis, 1996). Although many boys may certainly miss out with regard to the social and cultural benefits of literacy capacity, their disconnection from this area of schooling appears to exist within a gender system that affords them alternative advantages. As such, it seems a reform focus on the construction of masculinities and femininities, within schools and more broadly, might enable a more politically accountable (and educationally effective) framework for equity interventions in schools. Discussions of gender-

justice that foreground differential attainment (in this instance, with regard to literacy) shift the focus of equity concern from an examination of the school's role in perpetuating social inequalities, to a comparison of intra-school opportunities - ignoring the broader implications of educational access and performance.

In Extracts 1-4, accounts of boys' current 'disadvantage' were established *without reference to* historical barriers to girls' academic participation and achievement, or to the broader location of schooling. This was achieved in Extracts 1 and 2 by the construction of curricular emphases as 'arbitrary' rather than as a reflection of valued/valuable skills - a context-free depiction of education in which equality of gendered outcomes represented the only criterion against which 'good methods' could be measured. In Extracts 3-4, boys' disadvantage was fore-grounded within accounts assuming a current symmetry of gendered power (absenting ongoing inequalities) – against which continuing efforts to meet the needs of girls were positioned as necessarily discriminatory.

The second repertoire identified for analysis comprised accounts that, unlike Extracts 1-4, *did* make mention of the broader historical and social context of boys' current achievement 'crisis'. Yet, analysis of these accounts showed that reference to past patterns of female marginalization *also* served to construct boys as currently suffering an 'achievement disadvantage' requiring immediate, boy-oriented, assessment/curriculum reform.

Within a repertoire of boys' underachievement as a result of the 'feminization of curriculum', historical narratives depicted barriers to the success of female students

as a ‘thing of the past’. Accounts grounded in such constructions positioned girls’ current high performance as evidence that feminist efforts to improve female achievement have been *too* successful – to the extent that the ‘pendulum is now swinging back’. Through a framework of ‘presumptive equality’ (Cox, 1995), use of this repertoire served to depict girls and boys as socially symmetrical populations whose members are now comparably empowered and comparably oppressed. In turn, boys’ contemporary underperformance (a divergence from this assumed equality) was depicted as a gender disadvantage *equivalent* to that once faced by girls, and requiring equivalent remedial efforts.

In Extracts 5 and 6, transactional narratives constructed efforts aimed at raising girls’ achievement since the 1980s as having directly *caused* the decline evident in boys’ performance over the same period. Within these accounts, constructions of barriers to girls’ achievement as having been ‘entirely removed’ enabled speakers to acknowledge the (past) marginalization of female students, whilst refuting the contemporary relevance of efforts aimed at improving their participation and performance.

In Extracts 7 and 8, the construction of male and female students as symmetrical populations with *opposite* needs and abilities enabled interventions for girls to be constructed as necessarily detrimental to boys. The metaphor of a pendulum was central to these accounts, serving to construct girl-friendly reform as having ‘tipped the scales’ of achievement by weighting curriculum in favour of girls’ ‘side’ of the academic spectrum. Pendulum accounts were shown to enable an acknowledgement of past barriers to girls’ attainment (‘push for girls *was* required’), and the depiction

of girls' current performance as evidence that efforts to remove them have gone too far ('the pendulum is now swinging back'). Through metaphors of symmetry and equivalence, such accounts served to define girl-friendly interventions as the *cause* of boys' achievement decline, and to position comparable boy-friendly efforts as the obvious/necessary means of restoring gender 'equilibrium'.

At the centre of all accounts depicting educational 'feminization' as the *cause* of boys' underachievement was the notion that efforts to improve the academic engagement of girls have been entirely successful, as evidenced by the notion that female students now 'out-perform' their male peers. Given that such accounts served to justify targeted interventions for boys (on the grounds that the continued focus on girl-friendly literacy is 'unfair' now that barriers to female success have been removed), it seems necessary to interrogate the political consequences of this pivotal assumption.

As was discussed in the introduction to this thesis, reform for girls in the 1970s and 80s was justified on the basis of concern as to the role of education in exacerbating existing gendered inequalities. That is, schools were found to contribute to girls' limited options in social and economic life through the provision of narrow and biased curriculum and pedagogy. Analysis of the political location of education (in terms of the post-school educational and employment paths schools make available to students), *as well as* local concerns about participation and achievement, were significant in informing the equity interventions that ensued. It seems that 'pendulum accounting', depicting boys' current low performance as requiring *equivalent* interventions to those implemented for girls, shifts the focus of 'what

counts' as an equity concern – reformulating evidence of girls' improved attainment as proof that feminist interventions have reached *all* of their goals.

Given, as has been argued throughout this thesis, that girls' educational achievement has not automatically translated into tertiary and workplace success, it appears that many of the grounds on which feminist school reform were mounted *still exist*. As such, it seems that boys' underachievement does not represent a shift in terms of the gender that may be deemed 'disadvantaged' by a fixed set of criteria, as suggested by 'pendulum' accounts. Rather, it seems that such accounts reframe these benchmarks, such that 'underperformance' becomes synonymous with disadvantage in and of itself. The construction of boys and girls as symmetrical populations (in terms of social/economic power) works to position boys' relatively low achievement (the only 'disadvantage criterion' made relevant) as evidence that boys experience an equivalent inequity to that once faced by girls. Such a framework reduces questions of equity from an analysis of academic access, participation and post-school implications to an abstracted comparison of performance outcomes. This orientation has significant implications, potentially working to compound *continuing* gendered power differentials with an intensified focus on the interests of boys, justified through a re-appropriated discourse of 'gender equity'.

4.5 Conclusions

Like constructions of teachers as 'to blame', accounts of boys as 'disadvantaged by curricular feminization' attributed responsibility for male students' underachievement to conditions beyond their own control. Accounts of male

'disadvantage' depicted both girls' achievement and boys' failure as the fictive result of a feminized curriculum that has given girls their success while withholding that of boys. Although produced in a context of boys' acknowledged underperformance, the representations discussed naturalized boys' potential to succeed when curricular provision is 'equitable'. In turn, boy-oriented curriculum reform was legitimated as both a moral necessity ('methods must not be unfairly gender-skewed') and educational imperative ('a biased curriculum does not yield accurate results').

The accounts discussed in this chapter reflect the historical pattern, identified by Cohen (2004, 1998, 1996), through which constructions of inadequate curricula have protected boys' underachievement from meaningful analysis. Arguments of this kind have averted investigation from the ways in which assumptions of male potential might *re-produce* existing academic tensions for boys. Where reform aimed at raising boys' performance has oriented to the accommodation of 'inherent male capacities to achieve', Cohen argues that it naturalizes the very masculine 'ways of being' incompatible with central aspects of academic engagement. With regard to literacy performance this seems particularly significant. Indeed, the notion that the proliferation of literacy requirements represents a curricular 'feminization' normalizes/reproduces the very disjunction between masculinity and literacy capacity deemed (at various historical junctures) to be the core of boys' achievement 'problems'.

The adoption of a discursive perspective in this chapter allowed the specific form of the pattern identified by Cohen to be investigated in the context of the current boys'

achievement 'crisis'. This analytic orientation also enabled accounts positioning boys as 'disadvantaged by feminized curriculum to be interrogated in terms of their political and educational consequences.

To this end, it was shown that constructions of feminized curriculum as having 'hindered' boys while 'helping' girls worked to naturalize the notion that boys and girls have inherent capacities to which curricular emphases may or may not be 'suited'. This framework reproduces an approach to educational reform positioning male and female students as 'competing victims', orienting to the accommodation of gendered needs and capacities rather than challenging/expanding the options for engagement available to all students. In turn, such an orientation may be seen to justify curriculum reform that reproduces as natural the very gendered needs and capacities it seeks to 'address'. As long as boys' literacy 'inability' is accommodated within academic content and testing (through the reduction of literacy requirements or the remasculinization of methods by which these skills are taught), it seems that constraints on boys' options for connection with literacy will be strengthened and maintained.

Analysis also showed that accounts of boys as disadvantaged by 'feminized' curriculum functioned to justify reform for boys as a gender equity priority. This was achieved within accounts premised on the notion that girls' current success is proof that *all* barriers to female engagement with school have been effectively removed. Against this background, the continued (girl-friendly) literacy focus was held to result in disadvantage for boys comparable to that previously experienced by girls.

It appears that accounts of this kind have significant consequences for all students, in that they work to re-frame educational equity agendas. While gender equity concerns have historically considered issues of access, participation and the social location of schooling, constructions of male 'disadvantage' reduce this discussion to a comparison of 'outcome performance'. Such constructions absent acknowledgement of the advantage boys *still* experience in terms of post-school educational and employment pathways - patterns likely to be exacerbated by a renewed focus on male students' interests, justified as educational 'equity' interventions.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDERED LEARNERS

5.1 Gender and ‘reason’: an historical perspective on learning and achievement

As has been argued throughout this thesis, contemporary accounts of boys’ failure bear the trace of dominant historical patterns through which sense has been made of both masculinity and femininity in relation to educational performance.

Analyses by Cohen (2004; 1998; 1996) and Walkerdine (1990; 1989) provide what Foucault has termed a *history of the present* in this regard – an examination of the conditions through which our common-sense understandings of gender and achievement have been produced, and have come to be fortified as ‘part of the natural order’. Their investigations enable persuasive, contemporary interpretations of gendered attainment patterns (such as those discussed in the preceding analytic chapters) to be traced to the historical construction of the ‘sexed mind’, and to the sedimentation of gender binaries in framing our conceptions of learning and knowledge.

Authors such as Cohen and Walkerdine contend that the production and explanation of the mind has historically been located within the gendered body. Where a differentiation between male and female bodies has been central to the very definition of the ‘intellect’, it follows that reason can never be gender neutral. Indeed, as Walkerdine argues, the *cogito* may be seen to reflect a rebirth of the thinking self (without female intervention) that positioned female nature *outside* rationality. She explains that this positioning, evidenced as it was by the

Enlightenment's scientific gaze, should be seen not as a simple mistake or distortion, but as a productive force with continuing ideological and material effects.

Amongst these effects is the naturalized positioning of value-disparate, gendered binaries at the heart of what it is 'to know'. Since the gendered body has historically provided a basis for explanation of the mind, the masculine/feminine dichotomy has been "internal to, and productive of, the means by which we understand reason" (Walkerdine, 1990: 68). Correspondingly, the longstanding conflation of rationality and masculinity has both naturalized boys' achievement, and seen femininity positioned as antithetical to reason and to 'proper' academic performance. As both Cohen and Walkerdine explain, this binary valuation is entrenched to the extent that femininity is typically *equated* with poor performance, even when measures of attainment show that girls are doing well. At historical junctures in which girls have *out-performed* their male peers, the productive force of this connection has been particularly significant.

Through historical analysis, Cohen and Walkerdine demonstrate that the pattern in explaining girls' success relative to boys' failure (a circumstance that is by no means new) has *not* been to subvert the established gender order of the academic hierarchy. Rather, evidence of girls' attainment has been interpreted such that the 'naturally' gendered achievement divide has remained entirely intact. As the above examples illustrate, this has been achieved in two dominant, interconnected ways. Firstly, boys' achievement has been attributed to something *intrinsic* (for example, the 'nature' of the male intellect), whereas their failure has been linked to the

inadequacy of *external* classroom conditions (methods, teachers, texts). As such, male underachievement has been explained away and the facticity of boys' potential to succeed (where conditions are 'appropriate') remains unchallenged. Echoes of this finding are unmistakable in the preceding analytic chapters, where attributions of responsibility for boys' underachievement were linked to ineffectual teachers and inappropriate curriculum. Boys themselves were not implicated in the context of these accounts; their poor performance positioned, instead, as inevitably remediable should educational conditions 'improve'.

The second means by which the hierarchy of gendered intellect has been maintained is through the re-packaging of boys' failure as evidence of 'potential', and of girls' success as proof of 'pathology'. Both Cohen and Walkerdine explain that, as a result of the longstanding conflation of potential and masculinity, the relation between these two concepts and 'achievement' is highly complex. Indeed, they argue, the 'gendering' of potential has seen boys' poor performance read as a sign that they 'possess' capacity – in other words, their potential is evident precisely *because* it is invisible. Conversely, girls' achievement has been taken to signify 'lack'; their success downgraded as resulting from hard work and passivity – qualities deemed pathological in modern classrooms where the 'normal' child is held to reach meaningful understanding through a process of 'active enquiry'. Historical interpretations of this kind provide a backdrop for the discussion to be presented in this final analytic chapter.

As both Cohen and Walkerdine argue, the patterns of accounting for gendered achievement discussed above have perpetuated the marginalization of girls'

attainment from the realm of genuine, valued scholarship, and rendered their success (relatively) meaningless at the very moment it is acknowledged. Moreover, they contend that interpretations of this kind deflect attention from male underachievement, *to the detriment of boys*. The historical trend of positioning boys' failure as the result of 'external conditions' or as evidence of 'healthy, latent potential' has, they argue, protected male underperformance from meaningful analysis. These explanations have turned the focus outward, resulting in a succession of changes to classroom conditions for which girls' high attainment (rather than boys' failure) has been the officially acknowledged catalyst and object of critical enquiry.

Perhaps most significantly for the purposes of the present analysis, the continued salience of interpretations of boys' present-day underperformance as the result of external conditions, and as evidence of their 'natural potential', may ultimately be seen to *exacerbate* the problem. Cohen (1998) succinctly summarizes this dilemma and options for its resolution:

If ... the discourse on achievement is structured so that practices have the achievement of boys as their object, then the call for a new focus on boys is not only not 'new', but likely to perpetuate the historical process which has worked for so long to produce the fiction of boys' potential and has protected boys' underachievement from scrutiny, processes which, as we can see today, have not served them well. Focusing on boys' underachievement requires first rethinking the terms of the debate. The first step is to problematise boys, not girls, and the construction of masculinities (p.30).

Informed by this type of historical analysis, and with a view to investigating potentially sedimented effects of the 'gendering' of reason/knowledge, it is to the role of masculinity construction in the context of the boys' achievement debate that analysis will now turn.

5.2 Boys' underachievement and the construction of the gendered learner

Discussion in the first two analytic chapters focused upon the dominant means by which the 'cause' of boys' underachievement was explained, and responsibility for its remediation allocated externally. In each of these sections, it was argued that boys were positioned as 'blameless' with regard to their underperformance, the facticity of their potential maintained within accounts attributing its current 'latency' to conditions beyond their control. In each of these chapters, the construction of inherent male learning needs and styles as necessarily at odds with current pedagogy functioned to position boys' failure as the result of unconscionably gendered educational practices that must be redressed for the maintenance of fairness and equity.

Chapter 3 investigated accounts in which boys' failure was externalized as the fault of inadequate teachers. The construction of educators as 'critical' in facilitating the manifestation of boys' potential saw boys absolved of responsibility for their underperformance. Within these accounts, teachers were positioned as obliged both to 'diagnose' and 'accommodate' boys specific learning requirements, and to refrain from 'disadvantaging' them through recourse to 'default' teaching strategies. Interrogation of masculinity construction with regard to student-teacher interaction and interpretations of achievement was sidelined in these extracts as discussion depicted boys' learning needs as entirely immutable. Where boys' (in)capacities were constructed as beyond a teacher's power to change, it followed logically that their achievement could only be enhanced by improving the (comparatively flexible) practice of educators.

Chapter 4 addressed accounts in which boys' failure was attributed to an overly 'feminized' curriculum. Once again, boys were protected from blame for their failure through the positioning of contemporary curriculum as 'skewed against them' and as actively precluding their success. In these accounts, the construction of male and female capacities as inflexible built the moral implication that pedagogic choices should not be disproportionately suited to the skills of either gender. This construction served a variety of functions in deflecting attention away from the intersection of masculinity and schooling as a site in which issues of gendered achievement might be investigated and addressed. Firstly, accounts of this kind positioned male underperformance as having been caused by efforts to raise the achievement of their female peers, interventions held to be discriminatory. In addition, they served to construct present-day gendered achievement data as a fictive representation, reflecting the success a skewed curriculum has 'given' to girls and 'withheld' from boys. The notion of male potential thus remained intact within accounts linking boys' declining attainment to the (discriminatory) process of 'curricular feminization' rather than to declining levels of actual content knowledge or ability.

The preceding chapters illustrate that the dominant mode of accounting for boys' underperformance across the Hansard transcripts was to attribute responsibility for the problem to factors external to boys themselves. As Cohen (1998) argues, this is a pattern that has functioned historically to maintain a 'fiction of boys' potential', and to deflect attention from the role that the construction of masculinity has played, and continues to play, in both the interpretation and reproduction of boys' underachievement. This final chapter aims to turn the focus back, and to provide a

critical examination of the construction of masculinity in the contemporary context of the boys' achievement debate.

Whereas the previous chapters have focused upon constructions of causation and responsibility for boys' underperformance, this chapter investigates the construction of 'the male learner himself' in accounts seeking to explain and interpret boys' declining attainment. Here, attention turns to the contradictory discursive framework through which witnesses to the Inquiry made sense of boys, and of girls, as they sought to explain disparate levels of gendered attainment. Five interpretative repertoires will be identified in this regard, each of which will be analyzed in terms of the subject positions (Davies & Harre, 1990) they afford both male and female students.

Each of these repertoires will be shown to depend on a relational contrast between male and female learners that positions masculinity and femininity as dichotomous categories, associated respectively with the binary poles of unequally valued learning behaviours (activity vs passivity, compliance vs resistance, meaningless learning vs meaningful learning, attention to detail vs real understanding, and manipulation vs integrity). It will be argued that these repertoires, and their binary associations, illustrate the explanatory resources comprising the 'common sense' evident across the corpus. Further, it will be shown that these patterns are significantly implicated in the *reproduction* of the problem of boys' underachievement.

This chapter will illustrate that the un-deconstructed, value-disparate binaries used to account for male versus female learners ultimately work to naturalize the success of boys *even when it is not evident*, and to *pathologize girls' success* at the moment it is acknowledged. While this finding will be shown to reflect historical patterns in the interpretation of boys' failure, it will be argued that it is achieved in the contemporary socio-historical context by one primary means: the conflation of valorized, hegemonic masculine traits with authentic, valuable scholarship - even when they bear little relation to evidence of attainment.

It will be argued that the use of stereotypical, binary constructions to make sense of gendered learners serves both to critique and valorize hegemonic masculinity, setting up contradictory subject positions for male and female students. Masculinity is simultaneously problematized (boys are failing) and valorized (the presence of valued masculine attributes is taken to mean that boys are superior, 'authentic' learners even when they fail). It will be argued that these constructions produce a series of ideological dilemmas with regard to boys' subject positioning, between the maintenance of a masculine identity (requiring the 'activity' and 'independence' associated, across this corpus, with 'genuine scholarship') and successful engagement with school (where high marks often require 'feminine' behaviours such as compliance and passivity). Indeed, as Jackson (1998) has argued, many male students build their adequacy as 'real boys' in relation to what they perceive as the effeminized academic world; not working hard can be a strategy by which boys distance themselves from the 'dangerously weak' pursuit of school learning. Mac an Ghail's (1994) interviews with British secondary-school boys also attest to the perceived 'femininity' of school and academic engagement, one student explaining

that ‘the work you do here is girls’ work. It’s not real work. It’s just for kids’ (1994: 59). It can be seen that male students consequently face an identity dilemma: they can fail and be ‘proper boys’, or succeed and risk being positioned as ‘insufficiently male’. As such, it may be seen that speakers valorizing those ways of being male that they are simultaneously positioning as the ‘cause of boys’ underachievement’, like those constructing boys’ failure as a problems of teachers or methods, risk perpetuating the problem they are trying to solve.

5.3 Girls and boys as ‘passive’ versus ‘active’

A pervasive repertoire through which witnesses to the Inquiry constructed male learners was that serving to depict boys as fundamentally ‘active’ in the process of knowledge acquisition. Through binary representations, this repertoire served to position boys as inherently oriented to learning through action and involvement, rather than through traditional academic tasks such as reading, listening and copying. Within accounts of this kind, the conflation of masculinity with ‘activity’ (and femininity with ‘passivity’) rendered boys’ failure understandable, observed, as it is, in the generally passive context of contemporary classroom environments.

The positioning of boys as ‘active’ learners, and of girls as contrastingly ‘passive’ is not surprising, and reflects traits stereotypically located within a gendered binary. What is interesting, however, is the way in which the poles of this dichotomy are ascribed unequal educational value, and disproportionately aligned with ‘authentic scholarship’.

Willis (1989) explains that the educational valuation of 'activity' and 'passivity' may be traced to the emergence of child-centred pedagogy. This philosophy aimed to move beyond educational authoritarianism and the notion of 'learning through work', to an understanding of learning as best achieved through facilitated 'play'. Although children's nature, in this model, was held to be gender-neutral and universal, Willis argues that 'the natural child' of this theory can be shown to possess traits traditionally associated with middle-class males. Boys' learning, dominantly categorized by teachers as 'exploratory' and 'constructive' (Shuard, 1982), is clearly consonant with the explicit objectives of child-centredness that define genuine learning as a process of active discovery. Girls' learning, typically characterized as 'structured', 'inward-looking' and 'rule-oriented' (Shuard, 1982), reflects attributes officially outlawed by the anti-authoritarian stance of child-centredness, particularly the passivity associated with 'work' as opposed to 'play'.

Through this lens, it seems clear that, where boys' learning behaviours display activity and enquiry, they may be positioned as 'real boys' and as engaged in appropriate, authentic knowledge acquisition. Indeed, in studies by Clarricoates (1978, 1980), primary school teachers reported that boys were the students they preferred to teach and found most rewarding, despite their being 'harder to control'. On the other hand, where girls' success has been seen to reflect the appropriate characteristics of the 'enquiring child', they have tended to be positioned as 'aggressive' or labelled 'tomboys' (Walkerdine, 1983). When girls have been successful by *other* means (for example, by employing traditionally feminine learning styles and the feared trait of 'passivity'), their success has been construed as inauthentic; achievement reached without activity deemed to be no achievement

at all. As Willis (1989) argues, the positioning of activity as the only means to genuine understanding has frequently meant that girls' success has been simply *explained away*.

Although Willis and Walkerdine's studies were undertaken in the 1980s when child-centred pedagogy was at its most dominant, echoes of their interpretations are unmistakable in the extracts that follow. It seems that now, as then, academic success (specifically that achieved by girls) may be undermined if it is achieved in the 'wrong way': that is, through learning processes deemed to be 'passive' and, therefore, 'inauthentic'. The continuing relevance of such findings may be deemed somewhat surprising when addressed in the context of shifting educational priorities and philosophies. Indeed, the enduring valorization of child-centred pedagogy's 'active, enquiring child' within talk about achievement seems at odds with contemporary practices and policies characterized by a (re)turn to 'standards-based education' (Crittenden, 1994; Hearn, 1996).

Lingard and Douglas (1999) have argued that restructured educational systems, in a contemporary context of social disinvestment and economic rationalism, have been pushed to provide measurable evidence of policy and investment outcomes. In turn, schools have been encouraged to return to a more didactic and structured form of teaching to satisfy demands of an 'efficiency fetish' and to ensure that standards are met. This shift 'back to basics', Lingard and Douglas argue, represents a backlash against progressive and child-centred pedagogies, replacing notions of teaching as 'facilitation of enquiry' with a (re) conceptualization of teaching as 'transmission'.

It would be plausible to assume that this backlash might be reflected by a corresponding shift in understandings of activity and passivity in modern educational contexts. Where the attainment of outcomes (as opposed to engagement with correct/authentic learning processes) is held to be paramount, it follows that stereotypically feminine learning behaviours of 'hard work' and 'rule-following' should enjoy a rise in valuation. The established link between these 'passive' learning traits and outcome achievement would appear to align 'female learning' with currently valued educational priorities.

Yet critical education researchers such as Lingard and Douglas (1999, see also Kenway *et al.*, 1997; Skelton, 1994) argue this has not been the case. Instead, they contend that contemporary managerialist discourse focusing on targets and outcomes represents a structural *masculinization* of education. This masculinization is reflected in pedagogy through the 'return to basics' held to benefit boys by refocusing on the acquisition of core skills rather than (feminine, process-oriented) 'reflection'. This shift has also been linked to a call for more male teachers, and the notion that the 'discipline, order and rigour' men provide better suits boys' learning needs and is an essential means of improving the engagement and results of this group.

From these arguments it may be seen that the shift from progressive to standards-based pedagogies has not been linked to a corresponding shift in the valuation of stereotypically gendered learning styles. Girls' purported 'passivity', outlawed within child-centred, action-oriented philosophies, appears to be held in no higher esteem within present outcome-focused pedagogical frameworks. Although now

favouring the structured teaching once construed as 'feminine', contemporary pedagogy appears to have 're-masculinized' this brand of more passive learning by positioning it as competitive, outcome-focused and rigorous (Raphael Reed, 1999). Such re-framing continues to naturalize the link between masculinity and achievement and to preclude girls' attainment from being valued as 'authentic'.

Of course, at the level of classroom teaching, the influence of both child-centred and more performance-oriented pedagogies is present within contemporary methods and interpretations of learning and success. This was seen in the context of Chapters 3 and 4, where witnesses' concern about outcomes was balanced against concern about process and the facilitation of individual potential. In Derridean terms, the trace of the older, progressive discourse is visible in the new, and the meanings of each are established relationally.

At the 'chalkface', Lingard and Douglas (1999) contend that (particularly female) teachers bear the brunt of tensions between budget/outcome-oriented expectations and continuing pressures to provide caring, differentiated educational experiences for individual students. They argue that the propensity for female educators to support child-centred approaches over those meeting the expectations of their own role as accountable professionals intensifies the emotional work in which they must engage, and sits in tension with policy demands currently placed upon them.

In the context of these shifting external constraints, and multiple interpretative frameworks, the persistent construction of passive/feminine learning as 'inauthentic' is particularly striking. In the analysis that follows, it will be shown

that, regardless of pedagogical framework, the construction of boys' as inherently oriented to action, and girls to passivity, served to determine the authenticity and value of their respective achievements. This dominant valorization of masculinity/activity, even in the context of boys' failure, was a central feature of the contradictory framework through which witnesses made sense of male learners.

The repertoire of boys as inherently 'oriented to action' is evident in Extract 1, below. Here, the active/passive dichotomy works in tandem with other gendered binaries ('constructive' versus 'unproductive' learning; 'participatory' versus 'receptive' engagement) in which the more highly valued term invariably describes traits associated with male learners. The logic of these explanatory oppositions is such that new pairs become easily incorporated into this mutually reinforcing system. Ultimately, the axis of 'authentic versus inauthentic learning' is subsumed into this framework, and positioned, likewise, as a gendered polarity.

Extract 1 follows a request by Committee member Mr Cadman that teacher Mr Townsend elaborate on his findings as to effective classroom strategies for dealing with boys.

Extract 1

Mr Townsend—Boys needed to be in a cooperative situation. I have noted jigsaw puzzles there—I had activities for them to go on with. Girls can be told, 'When you have finished your work, go on with something quietly,' and they will find something. With boys, no. So I had jigsaw puzzles, model cars, model trains—things like that that they built.

... [two paragraphs omitted covering Townsend's explanation of the need for boys to have competition, humour, involvement, movement and responsibility in all activities]

We did a test on the boys in the class to see whether they were a visual, an auditory or a kinesis learner—a physical learner. There was not one auditory learner in the class. We also tested the girls class, and we found that three-quarters were auditory learners. So these girls liked to sit down to learn by being spoken to. The boys were all visual and physical learners. They want to be quickly shown how to do it and then be allowed to have a turn.

(Tallebudgera, Qld 1241)

In Extract 1, the gendered nature of the active/passive learning binary is presented as a fact that is both practically demonstrable, and scientifically verifiable. The gender differences established initially in this account as having obvious face validity (“Girls can be told ‘...go on with something quietly’...With boys, no”) are subsequently depicted as reflections of an *underlying* distinction between the inherent orientations of male and female learners.

The speaker explains that his “test” of pupils’ preferred learning styles, although initially sex-neutral and exploratory, yielded results that fell along distinctly gendered lines. He presents this disparity as primarily related to the “auditory” dimension, on which the girls seemed to cluster (“three quarters were auditory learners”), but the boys did not register (“there was not one auditory learner”). Townsend’s interpretation of these “results” as signifying that girls like “to sit down and learn by being spoken to”, whereas boys “want to be quickly shown how to do it and then be allowed to have a turn”, is interesting at a number of levels.

Importantly, the numerical representations employed in this account, while appearing to reflect the ‘fact’ of his students’ learning styles, can alternatively be seen as argumentative tools in the context of Extract 1. As Potter, Wetherell and Chitty (1991) explain, quantification is used performatively to build the

argumentative robustness of specific versions, and to undermine the credibility of alternatives. Although quantified descriptions appear simply to reflect an external, countable reality, Potter *et al.* argue that they are, nonetheless, constructed accounts comprising action-oriented selections dictating *what* and *how* to count.

Different levels of descriptive selection (and interpretative direction) are evident within Townsend's report. Most obvious, and transparent, is the choice to define students as "visual", "auditory" or "kinesic" learners. The validity or mutual exclusivity of these categories is not questioned in the extract (students are depicted as naturally possessing one "or" another of these styles), and, although they obviously reflect the language of a specific learning framework, these traits are depicted as existing *prior* to being identified and labelled.

Beyond establishing the facticity of three distinct learning styles, a further point of selection is evident in the relaying of "results". Explaining that "three-quarters of girls" were auditory learners, whereas "not one boy" possessed this learning style, the speaker's account maximizes the gender discrepancy. This is achieved, firstly, by defining "auditory learning" (the dimension on which boys and girls showed the most marked difference) as the relevant point of comparison. The contrast is then bolstered by comparing a large fractional figure ("three-quarters" of girls) with an extrematized, absolute representation ("not one" boy) in reporting scores on this axis. Through these techniques, Townsend supports his generalized conclusion that his girls "were" auditory (passive, receptive) learners, while his boys were contrastingly "visual" and "physical".

The notion that alternative stories could be built from these data illustrates the constructed nature of what might otherwise appear an ‘un-interpreted’ report. For example, this dichotomised account absents discussion of the remaining ‘quarter’ of girls whose learning styles were presumably the *same* as the boys’ - a mixture of “visual” and “kinetic” orientations. Further, it deflects attention from the overlap evident if students’ *second* preferred learning dimension had been taken into account. Just as the boys liked to “be shown” and then to “have a turn” (their *two* dominant preferences accommodated), the girls may have preferred to be “told” and *then* engaged in a “visual” or “physical” manner.

For the purpose of the present analysis, however, the ‘accuracy of representation’ and the ‘real gender overlap’ is not the point at issue. Rather, the aim is to show that the speaker’s conclusions were not necessitated by the external reality ‘reflected’ in his account. While other stories about his data could have been told, Townsend’s conclusions direct interpretation along predictably gendered lines. Complex patterns of ‘learning orientations’ are reduced to a binaristic explanation contrasting male activity, and female passivity, in a manner depicted as ‘evidence based’. Moreover, the account’s conclusion reinforces the active/passive gender dichotomy at both lexical and grammatical levels. In his closing description of female students, Townsend employs a passive construction, emphasising girls’ physical inactivity (they “like to sit down”) and recipient status (they learn by “being spoken to”). Conversely, in his portrayal of male students, the emphasis is on their *activity*; boys want to be “shown”, but only “quickly”, before they are “allowed to have a turn”. By way of these purportedly ‘factual’ representations, the gendered nature of the active/passive learning binary is established in both verifiable and observable terms.

Throughout the extract, the gendered dichotomy with regard to learning orientation is aligned with other value-disparate binaries, the poles of which are associated with male and female students respectively. This is evident, in the first instance, where the speaker explains that “Girls can be told, ‘When you have finished your work, go on with something quietly,’ and they will find something. With boys, no. So I had jigsaw puzzles, model cars, model trains—things like that that they built”. At the heart of this description is the polarity of compliance versus resistance that works in conjunction with that contrasting activity and passivity. Because receptive (female) and dynamic (male) orientations are positioned as immutable, girls are able to comply with teacher’s requests for unobtrusive behaviour, (they “can be told” to “go on with something quietly”), whereas boys are depicted as simply *incapable* of meeting this demand (“With boys, no”).

Interestingly, in ascribing value to these opposing behaviours, girls’ compliance is not automatically positioned positively. Rather than foregrounding what could be seen as their ‘initiative’ (they can engage themselves when finished their work, whereas boys are reliant on activities provided), the emphasis is, instead, on girls’ *malleability* and boys’ inflexible commitment to activity. The poles of this opposition are linked to other dichotomies; boys are held to require (valued) “cooperative” and “constructive” tasks, as opposed to the, presumably, ‘individual’, ‘unproductive’ pastimes pursued by girls. Indeed, the contrasting worth of the activities in which boys and girls engage appears to be reflected in the level of detail with which their tasks are described. In comparison to the unspecified “something” with which the girls occupied themselves, the boys’ construction of “jigsaw puzzles, model cars, model trains” appears active, exploratory, and unequivocally positive.

The notion that it is also a more *meaningful* use of their time reinforces the notion implicit throughout the extract: that boys' orientation to learning is somehow more 'real' than that of their female peers. Rather than simply being "spoken to", boys are positioned as wanting to turn theory into practice, the authenticity of their engagement evidenced by what they 'produce' and their desire, not only to know, but to "have a turn".

The positioning of passive, receptive learning as less genuine than that which is active and agentic is also evident within Extract 2, below. Here, (masculine) active learning is depicted as authentic, not only through its association with 'productivity', but through its links to historically proven, 'natural' modes of knowledge acquisition.

Extract 2

Mr Lillico—I would just like to add that, again, I think it is about being aware, and I really believe that we have only really discovered over the last, maybe, 30-50 years, that boys and girls learn differently. Girls tend to learn much better from the written word and from oral communication than boys. Boys tend to learn when they are actually doing something, when they are being shown. If we go back to the cave era, he was outside the cave grinding the corn, making the spears—he learnt that way. He did not learn it by reading it from a book. Neither did girls, but they do tend to take notice much more of the oral instruction than boys. So I am just saying to schools and to parents: if you want your son, or your male student, to remember something, you have actually got to be there doing it. You do not have to do the activity so much, I suppose, but show them how to do it and let them actually do it rather than telling them about it or letting them read about it.

(City Beach, W.A. 941)

In Extract 2, Western Australian principal Mr Lillico constructs an absolute distinction between male and female styles of learning ("boys and girls learn

differently”). Through reference to “the cave era”, he presents the disjunction between boys’ active orientation (“he was outside the cave grinding the corn, making the spears – he learnt that way”) and girls’ preferred, passive methods (“girls ... take much more notice of the oral instruction”) as ‘natural’ and, therefore, historically inevitable. Although Lilloco’s claim that we have only recently “discovered” gendered learning differences seems at odds with his contention that they have always been present, this contradiction is not irreconcilable. Indeed, implicit in the extract is the argument that boys’ current problems result from modern methods that have failed to accommodate longstanding, but unacknowledged, gendered needs.

As was the case in Extract 1, the positioning of boys and girls as active versus passive is achieved, here, through the depiction of a gendered division in preference for written/oral instruction as opposed to ‘participatory’ education. These styles of learning are presented as opposite and discrete; learning through reading or verbal explanation (“telling them about it or letting them read about it”) is explicitly counter-posed to learning through active engagement (letting them “actually do it”).

In Extract 2, this active/passive gender binary is clearly associated with a further dichotomous contrast: that of ‘natural’ versus ‘unnatural’ learning expectations. A comparison between “cave era” and current modes of learning (then, boys learned by “grinding the corn, making the spears”, not “by reading a book”) works to portray present-day educational techniques as somehow ‘artificial’, a shift away from more natural learning methods, the success of which has been ‘proven’ historically.

Through this polarized framework, boys' steadfast preference for activity (even in the face of the modern educational requirement of passivity) is evaluated positively along a number of dimensions. At the heart of this valuation is the notion that male students' orientation to action is, not only 'natural', but historically *adaptive*. Boys' dynamism is depicted as a contemporary manifestation of traits that have been essential to human survival, their drive to learn through action linked to the historical role of males as providers and protectors ("he was outside the cave grinding the corn, making the spears – he learnt that way"). In turn, male students' persisting preference for active learning marks the authenticity of their scholarship; boys are positioned as oriented to acquiring knowledge through natural means that have a history of real-world application and value. Contrastingly, girls' success within the context of the passive classroom environment is rendered inauthentic, their achievement the result of 'compliance' with the passive/artificial learning expectations boys continue to 'resist' (girls "take much more notice of the oral instruction").

Also in line with the authentic/inauthentic learning dichotomy is the notion, discussed in analysis of Extract 1, that boys' active approach to education makes the knowledge they accrue 'real' rather than 'purely theoretical'. As was the case in the previous extract, girls' learning is presented, here, as focused primarily on 'de-contextualized' instruction (through "the written word and "oral communication"), whereas boys' is focused upon that which is 'participatory' or 'applied' (they learn by "doing" as well as "being shown"). While girls' success, within this contrast, could be interpreted as a reflection of higher-order abilities (learning via oral and written instruction could be seen as evidence of capacity for making 'abstract

conceptual leaps'), this is certainly not the case. Rather, Lillico's account absents all notion of effort and ingenuity from girls' 'passive' learning style, presenting it in direct opposition to boys' active methods which he depicts as "actually doing something".

The relative valuation of boys' learning orientation, and eventual understandings, is also evident in Lillico's description of a parent or teacher's role within the education of male students. His emphasis on the instructor's involvement ("if you want your son, your male student, to remember something, you have actually got to be there doing it"), far from depicting boys as 'dependent', rather presents their genuine understanding as 'hard won'. Educating boys is taken to necessitate active effort from both student and teacher, the standards of boys' authentic understanding necessitating the energy and involvement of both parties. In comparison, educating girls is positioned as a 'softer option', requiring limited teacher effort but presumably yielding correspondingly limited outcomes in terms of 'real' understanding.

The pattern through which the authenticity of students' understanding was deemed to be commensurate with the active effort required to achieve it is also evident in Extract 3, below. Here, the facilitation of girls' achievement is depicted as 'undemanding' work for educators, the willingness of female students to accede to expectations of passivity/reproduction depicted as a straightforward route to their (somewhat limited) success. In comparison to girls' 'recipient' positioning, boys are depicted as *leading* the student-teacher interaction, challenging their instructor to

provide the active, participatory tasks through which authentic learning is held to be achieved.

In this extract, teacher Mrs Crossingham outlines what she constructs as the primary distinctions between male and female orientations to learning.

Extract 3

Mrs Crossingham—The girls are very happy to do written work and work that involves copying things off blackboards. For the boys, it is very much a verbal, interactive style of learning and I know there are boys in that room whom, the minute I say, ‘We are going to have to write something down’, I lose. If I say, ‘I want you to illustrate it’, I get a different response again. But while it is verbal and they can interact as a group and bounce ideas off each other, a lot more learning seems to take place than if we are just giving them a book and saying, ‘We’re going to read from this book and then we’re going to do an activity based on that book.’

(Griffith, N.S.W, 1162)

Extract 3, once again, builds a dichotomous contrast between girls’ preference for passive learning tasks and boys’ ‘natural’ orientation towards classroom (inter)action. This account is bolstered by the integration of related gender binaries, the active/passive polarity (girls will sit to “read”, “write” and “copy” whereas boys must “interact”) working in conjunction with the respective depiction of girls and boys as *reproductive* versus *creative* (girls will “copy” off the blackboard whereas boys prefer to “bounce ideas”) and *individualistic* versus *cooperative* (girls engage separately in classroom activities, whereas boys learn “as a group”). Along each of these dimensions, the feminine pole is associated with traditional, didactic teaching, whereas the masculine pole reflects the student-centred processes that are a feature of more ‘progressive’ pedagogies.

The gendered nature of the traditional/progressive disjunction rests, in this extract, on an additional binary: that of compliance versus resistance. Here, girls' willingness to accept a passive positioning ("the girls are very happy to do written work and work that involves copying things off blackboards") sees them 'naturally' equipped to succeed within structured, passive classrooms contexts. Whereas girls' learning is characterized, first and foremost, in terms of their general 'compliance', boys' comparative resistance is presented as a specific learning *style* ("for boys, it is very much a verbal, interactive style of learning"). This contrast builds the implication that boys' poor response to traditional/didactic teaching signals the 'lack of fit' between such methods and their unwavering 'learning orientation'. On the other hand, girls' success in the same contexts is depicted as reflecting, not a committed learning 'style', but rather their propensity for 'passive submission'.

The concomitant notions of activity/passivity and compliance/resistance, and the values associated with the poles of these binaries, are integral to the model of authentic learning built up in this extract. This becomes particularly evident in Crossingham's account of the response of male students to the provision of passive versus active classroom tasks: "The minute I say, 'We are going to have to write something down', I lose. If I say, 'I want you to illustrate it', I get a different response again". While this statement is a further example of the 'gendering' of compliance (unlike girls, boys will not even comply with what 'has' to be done), it sets up some important additional contrasts. Firstly, it presents the notion that male students *lead* rather than *follow* within student-teacher interaction, and are therefore *participants* rather than *recipients* within the learning process (a teacher's methods must *respond* to what boys will and will not do). Secondly, it depicts boys as able to

be 'won' or 'lost', positioning their attention and achievement as something a teacher can actively 'accomplish'. In contrast to the undemanding work of facilitating girls' achievement, boys' success is presented as the hard-won outcome of a teacher's creativity, responsiveness and active involvement. Further, these techniques are held to generate a qualitatively different kind of attainment. The combination of effort, action and creativity on behalf of male students *and* their teachers is taken to yield more authentic, valuable learning than that reached via the passive methods favoured by girls ("while it is verbal and they can interact as a group and bounce ideas off each other, a lot more learning seems to take place than if we are just giving them a book and saying, 'We're going to read from this book and then we're going to do an activity based on that book'").

In each of the extracts discussed above, the central construction of boys and girls as 'active' versus 'passive' served to determine the relative value of the outcome achievements, and broader learning orientations, of male and female students.

All three excerpts illustrated the mobilization of the active/passive dichotomy in conjunction with other gendered binaries, the valorized poles of which were invariably associated with boys. Through the binary logic of dichotomous categories, the dimension of authentic versus inauthentic learning was subsumed into this sense-making system, its poles attributed a similarly gendered association, and corresponding valuation. Through constructions of this kind, boys' learning was portrayed as a valuable, and highly sought-after, process of co-operation and participation, resulting in outcomes that were both constructive and concrete. Contrastingly, girls' learning (and demonstrable achievement) was depicted as

merely receptive and individualistic, their success reflecting 'submission' as opposed to active engagement towards outcomes they may be seen to 'own'.

The three extracts presented are examples of a representational pattern that was pervasive across the corpus, a pattern robust in its familiarity and 'common-sense' appeal. What is particularly interesting about these accounts, however, is the contradictory discursive framework built up in each to position the learning and achievement of boys and girls in a manner that is, ultimately, ambivalent and paradoxical.

At one level, Extracts 1-3 address a 'problem with boys'; the failure of this group is the catalyst and context of the discussion in which this talk arises. Yet, in none of these accounts is this concern described as a problem *of* boys. In the context of talk about their generalized underperformance, any notion of the need for boys to 'increase their effort' or 'strive to improve their performance' is notably absent.

Male students, in these extracts, are assigned characteristics that might significantly impact upon their prospects of academic success. Their 'requirement' of individual, active involvement could be read as a serious handicap in the context of modern classrooms where pressure for outcomes, and limited resources, often leave teachers ill-equipped to facilitate tasks of this kind. Yet, in none of the above extracts are these traits given a negative valuation. Instead, despite its association with boys' current underperformance, boys' unwavering commitment to active engagement is positioned as a badge of academic authenticity.

Although compliant (Extract 1), artificial (Extract 2) and reproductive (Extract 3) ‘passive’ learning is held to have secured girls’ current success, imitation of these methods is in no way advocated as a means of improving the results of boys. Rather, male students are celebrated for *failing* to employ these techniques, and for maintaining the masculine orientation that represents authentic learning. This kind of argument builds the notion that boys’ style of academic engagement is ideal, and that, while adopting a more ‘feminine’ orientation would improve their present-day results, to do so would be to lower the standards that would see them achieve to even *greater* heights in an ideal classroom context.

In this sense, it may be seen that the accounts put forward in Extracts 1-3 go further than those addressed in the preceding analytic chapters, where accounts externalizing the cause of boys’ failure served to depict boys’ themselves as having ‘no problem at all’. Here, not only is boys’ comparative underperformance presented as ‘no problem’, it is implicitly positioned as evidence of their *superior* academic potential.

As was explained in the introduction to this chapter, the paradoxical relationship between gender and achievement has a long history in the context of debates around boys’ academic performance. Cohen (1998) argues that this is because the very notion of potential is gendered. At various historical junctures, she explains that a boy’s apparent underperformance has been read as a sign that he has the *capacity* to succeed (his potential evident *because* it is not yet manifest), whereas a girl’s high performance has been taken to signify ‘deficiency’. Significantly, this paradoxical pattern of accounting has *not* been demonstrated in situations where the gendered

achievement differential has been reversed. Indeed Walkerdine (1994) explains that teachers did not attribute 'potential' to girls who showed poor mathematics performance, and Cohen (1998) demonstrates the historical pattern of attributing girls' failures, not to latent capacity, but to the limitations of their intellect.

The over-valuation of masculinity in comparison to femininity that this kind of accounting represents reflects a longstanding gendered pattern (Phoenix & Frosh, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). As Seymour-Smith, Wetherell and Phoenix (2002) explain, the culturally hegemonic nature of masculinity, and its positive valuation relative to femininity, imbues potentially negative male behaviours, and their consequences, with an ambivalently positive flavour. In Extracts 1-3, and more explicitly in Extracts 4-11 to follow, this may be seen as speakers construct representations of gendered learners (and, more specifically, male underachievement) from the unquestioned initial premise that masculine styles of learning and achievement are desirable, and necessarily positive.

In the analysis that follows, this will be shown to be achieved by way of binaristic constructions that not only associate masculine modes of learning with academic authenticity, but work to naturalize boys' success and pathologize that of girls. It will be argued that the specific form of such constructions represents the contemporary incarnation of the historical models of accounting by which boys' underperformance has been 'explained away'. These patterns reflect those identified by Cohen (1998), through which she demonstrates that boys' underachievement has long been seen to vanish:

before our very eyes as it becomes transformed into a healthy (and long overdue) rebellion against ineffectual teaching techniques, while girls' superiority becomes just a trick of the light, a matter of their compliance, obedience, or seduction of teachers by the neat appearance of their work (p.21).

The dominant binary constructions enabling the naturalization of boys' achievement, and the pathologization of that of girls, will be addressed in the remainder of this chapter. These dichotomies work in tandem with the active/passive gender binary already discussed in detail, and include the positioning of girls and boys respectively as 'compliant' versus 'resistant', as oriented to 'meaningless' versus 'meaningful' learning, as capable of 'attention to detail' versus 'real understanding' and as successful via 'manipulation' versus 'integrity'.

5.4 Girls and boys as 'compliant' versus 'resistant'

The binary of compliance/resistance was a dominant dimension on which witnesses to the Inquiry built their representations of gendered learners. As has already been discussed, this binary worked in conjunction with the active/passive and authentic/inauthentic dichotomies. In the preceding discussion, it was shown that the value of boys' learning style and outcome knowledge was established as a result of their resistance to the meaningless tasks to which girls passively 'submit', and from which their (limited) success may be seen to flow.

It seems that the opposing traits of compliance and resistance have longstanding links to gendered evaluations of in/authentic learning. Walkerdine (1990) explains that these associations may be traced to the 'outlawing' of compliant behaviour within child-centred teaching frameworks where rule-breaking is held to lead to 'real' understanding, and rule-following is counter-posed to the 'genuine' joy of discovery. Walden and Walkerdine (1985) argued that this pathologization of

compliance was a feature of accounts undermining girls' success as 'something that amounted to nothing'; where obedience was presented as a 'second-order' skill (of less importance than 'real understanding'), girls' achievement could be correspondingly downgraded. Likewise, Adams and Walkerdine (1986) found that, despite teachers' covert desire for neatness and obedience (to ensure the smooth and easy running of the classroom), the success of girls who plod, try hard and are kind, quiet and helpful was deemed less authentic than that achieved by boys who are difficult, obstreperous, naughty and dynamic. In the contemporary context, Walkerdine (1998) argues that factors once used to explain girls' *underperformance* (obedience, rule-following and good behaviour) are now being used to explain away their success; achievement reached via these methods being positioned, like boys' present underperformance, as peripheral to the 'real'.

In each of the extracts that follow, it will be argued that binary, gendered constructions of compliance versus resistance likewise serve to position boys' learning as 'genuine', and that of girls' as contrastingly 'inauthentic'. It will be shown that this is achieved through the construction of compliance as a 'second-order' ability, yielding a version of success inferior to that achieved by students who resist the push for 'submission' and maintain their orientation to 'real learning'. In turn, it will be argued that such representations work implicitly to naturalize boys' success (even in the absence of demonstrable attainment) and to pathologize girls' manifest achievement.

In Extract 4, teacher Ms Maclean builds the argument that the selection of texts that suit masculine interests is necessary if boys are to achieve in the English classroom.

Extract 4

CHAIR—Have you found a marked difference in attention, in engagement and in achievement even when the texts have been more suited to the boys?

Ms Maclean—Absolutely. I think it is all part of a package, though. The text selection is irrelevant if the delivery is pretty poor. If you have the complete package, you can go far, and the girls are not that turned off—girls will accommodate the text. You can find different gender ways in to a ‘boy text’, if you like.

(Palmerston, N.T. 1314)

This fourth extract builds a picture of boys as requiring a “complete package” of excellent educational “delivery”, and ‘gender-suitable’ texts, if they are to demonstrate “attention”, “engagement” and “achievement”. The “marked” difference made by the presence of these factors builds the clear implication that boys ‘resist’ educational methods that ‘fall short’ of this standard and do not excite in them an active desire to learn and be engaged.

In contrast to the construction of boys’ resistant stance, and emphasis on the conditions required for their (inevitable) success, girls are depicted in this extract in terms of their ‘compliance’. Specifically, this representation centres on the willingness of girls to engage with texts (and, possibly, styles of teaching) that do not entirely ‘suit’ their interests. In contrast to boys’ staunch requirement of texts that have intrinsic, gendered appeal, girls are presented as acquiescent; when faced with ‘masculine’ materials, Maclean explains that girls are “not that turned off” and will “accommodate” such texts.

While the talk in Extract 4 arises in a consensually accepted context of girls’ relatively high, and boys’ low, performance, it is significant to note that no explicit

mention is made as to the direction of this acknowledged discrepancy. Instead, the focus of this account is on the achievement of boys that *would/does* occur when classroom conditions are ideal (with boys, Maclean explains, “If you have the complete package, you can go far”). This positive, productive presentation is immediately compared with girls’ response in identical circumstances (girls are “not that turned off” and “will accommodate the text”), a response presented in the negative (it is not that girls ‘remain turned on’). Through this contrast, girls’ achievement is largely presented as a reflection of their compliance, and seems limited in comparison with the potential achievement of boys who are appropriately engaged.

As such, it seems that masculine ‘resistance’ is implicitly attributed a positive valuation within Extract 4; the flip-side of boys’ failure to connect when texts and teachers hold no interest is their ability to “go far” when conditions are ideal. In turn, the highs and lows of boys’ achievement appear to outweigh those that may be reached by girls via ‘accommodation’ and ‘consistent malleability’.

When taken to its logical conclusion, the valorization of ‘resistance’ evident in Extract 4 may be seen to reproduce the dominance of additional traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. Although girls’ accommodation of boy-oriented texts is primarily taken to reflect their compliance, it is presumably also linked to the notion that the characters, events or data these books comprise are not threatening to female students’ identities. On the other hand, boys’ refusal to connect with materials deemed ‘girl-oriented’ presumably reflects, not only a lack of inherent ‘interest’, but the failure of such materials to provide valuable learning experiences

with which boys are willing to *identify*. This argument is clearly cyclical; the valorization of masculine ‘resistance’ (in the form of the refusal to engage with ‘feminine materials’) establishes the provision of male-oriented texts as the ‘compromise option’ (as Maclean explains, “You can find different gender ways into a ‘boy text’, if you like”). In turn, this construction may be seen to reproduce the dominance of masculine traits, positioning them as the (valued) ‘norm’ at both textual and classroom levels. As Martino and Paillota-Chiarolli (2003) argue, textual selections of this kind risk reproducing the very forms of masculinity that position ‘boyness’ in opposition to connection with literacy.

The valorization of boys’ educational ‘resistance’, even in the face of their currently low levels of attainment, is also a feature of the extract that follows. In Extract 5, the link between resistance and authentic learning is, likewise, established through depiction of the greater heights of respectable achievement that ‘interest’, as opposed to ‘submission’, can ultimately reach. In this extract, however, the in/authentic learning binary works in conjunction with a further gendered dichotomy. Here girls’ success-via-compliance is positioned as a reflection of the ‘second-order’ process skills that are prioritized within contemporary models of assessment. Contrastingly, boys’ lower levels of ‘officially recognized’ achievement are taken to reflect the higher-order skills associated with ‘actual content knowledge’ as opposed to ‘organization’ or ‘obedience’.

Extract 5 appeared in the context of discussion between academic Professor Faith Trent and Committee member Senator Julia Gillard. The talk in this extract

addresses the qualities of male versus female learners that might see them differentially equipped to succeed where continuous assessment is required.

Extract 5

Prof Trent—Continuous assessment advantages girls. It does not advantage the boys, by and large.

Ms GILLARD—Why?

Prof. Trent—Most girls are better organized at that age. There are issues of nature. I am not suggesting that it is not, I just do not think it is all X and Y or Z. But girls tend to be better organized, they tend to be more future focused. They are probably more tolerant of things being unfair than the boys. Not being fair is something that is a very strong push among young males, whatever it is, and whether it is or whether it is not. With continuous assessment girls tend to get assignments in on time. It is the same with first year university. Boys did much better when we had sudden-death examinations, but there were problems with that as well and I am not suggesting we return to it.

(Adelaide, S.A. 879)

Throughout Extract 5, a number of binary categorizations work together to build a picture of boys' valorized 'resistance', and of the inferior success achieved by girls by way of passive 'compliance'.

From the outset in this extract, the speaker constructs her representation of gendered learners in terms of traits reflecting "nature" rather than 'conditioning' or 'nurture'. Although she frames her discussion in terms of general tendencies ("There are issues of nature. I am not suggesting that it is not, I just do not think it is all X and Y or Z"), the overlap Trent acknowledges appears to be located *within*, as opposed to *across*, the gender categories. Nevertheless, this acknowledgement enables her to describe what she presents as broad gendered trends ("girls tend to be better organized, they tend to be more future focused") and to position this interpretation as a 'balanced', rather than 'essentialist', account.

The description of female students provided within Extract 5 comprises what may be seen as ‘second-order’ skills of feminine compliance - skills positioned implicitly in the account as the route to girls’ correspondingly ‘second-order’ success. The key to girls’ relative achievement (their ability to be “organized”, to focus on the “future” and to “get assignments in on time”) is depicted as reflecting capacities outside the realm of ‘actual content knowledge’. On the other hand, Trent’s account of boys’ superior performance when the organizational skills they ‘resist’ are *not* required (“Boys did much better when we had sudden death examinations”) could be seen to suggest that this is a more genuine achievement; a reflection of true ‘knowledge acquisition’ rather than peripheral ‘process skills’.

The implicit contrast between ‘actual content knowledge’ and ‘peripheral ability’ works in two ways within Extract 5 to establish the inauthentic nature of success acquired through feminine ‘compliance’. Although the speaker orients to the benefits of the skills required within continuous assessment (she does not advocate a return to “sudden-death” exams), her account nonetheless depicts adherence to assessment conventions as distinct from genuine knowledge. In turn, female achievement, based largely upon compliance, appears an unreliable indicator of ‘true’ understanding. At another level, girls’ success is positioned as the inauthentic result of inbuilt assessment *bias* (“Continuous assessment advantages girls. It does not advantage the boys, by and large”). Ultimately female achievement is taken to reflect, not only skills *beyond* true knowledge acquisition, but assessment that *favours* the process skills with which girls are ‘naturally’ equipped. Through each of these contrasts, then, it may be seen that girls’ achievement is undermined at the

moment it is acknowledged (it is a 'biased result' or 'assessment effect'), whereas boys' current underperformance is taken to hold the promise of potential, authentic success.

In Extract 5, the contrast between 'genuine knowledge' and 'compliance with the rules of assessment' also serves to establish the relative *value* of gendered learning achievements. In addition to establishing the authenticity of boys' success, reference to boys' higher exam performance may be seen to present this kind of achievement as *qualitatively different* to that reached by girls via continuous assessment. Through connotations of risk and competition (that buy back into the valorized masculine traits opposing feminine 'compliance') boys' success in "sudden-death" exams is positioned as a valuable result. Without the buffer of 'organizational skills', boys' high performance in this context appears both authentic and transparent.

The notion that boys' are successful where testing is pared back (in exam assessment, you either 'know it or you don't') establishes this achievement as 'sincere'. In comparison, Trent depicts female achievement (reached via compliance) as potentially consistent with a lack of integrity. Her claim that girls are "probably more tolerant of things being unfair" presents their attainment as the result of an unscrupulous desire to succeed; a construction that undermines the legitimacy and value of the outcomes they accomplish. Once again, this paradoxical interpretation of gendered achievement may be seen to naturalize boys' success (even in its absence) while pathologizing that of girls. The absence of male attainment is re-packaged as reflecting the *presence* of 'right principles', while

girls' manifest achievement is taken to signal a *lack* of the academic integrity required to render their learning 'authentic'.

5.5 Girls and boys as oriented to 'meaningless' versus 'meaningful' learning

Throughout the preceding sections, it was argued that the gendered binaries of activity/passivity and resistance/compliance worked in tandem to position the learning style of boys as the route to 'authentic' academic accomplishment.

In Extracts 1-3, this was achieved through depictions of (masculine) 'activity' as the path towards meaningful learning outcomes based upon participation and engagement. In contrast, girls' passive learning orientation was held to equip them for a less significant kind of success, their achievements deemed 'conventional' and 'artificial' rather than 'concrete' and 'applied'. Similarly, in Extracts 4-5, the valorization of boys' 'resistance' was established through the depiction of this trait as a commitment to meaningful learning. In these accounts, speakers re-packaged boys' underachievement as an admirable rebellion against 'monotonous' and 'unjust' classroom conventions, compliance with which was conflated with 'genuine understanding'.

As this summary indicates, the dichotomy of 'meaningless' versus 'meaningful' learning was also a central feature of representations of male and female students. The function and consequences of this binary will be discussed, in more detail, in the following section of analysis.

Like the dichotomy of compliance/resistance, the dual notions of ‘meaningful’ and ‘meaningless’ learning have a longstanding relationship with gendered evaluations of academic authenticity.

Michèle Cohen (1998) explains that constructions of girls’ willingness to expend time and energy in attending to second-order tasks involving repetition and correct presentation have served to undermine the legitimacy of female learning outcomes in contexts of girls’ under *and* over achievement. Citing a 1985 monograph purporting to address boys’ underperformance in languages (written in a broader context of concern about girls’ underachievement in maths and sciences), Cohen illustrates dominant explanations of boys’ relatively poor results. She explains that teachers attributed the discrepancy to a curricular emphasis on ‘written accuracy’, and to girls’ higher standards of ‘neatness’, quoting a teacher who contended that “it is all too easy to take neat, careful written work produced by girls as evidence of linguistic ability whilst boys, who are probably just as capable, tend not to pay as much attention in this area”. Cohen argues that explanations of this kind have maintained, and continue to reproduce, a gendered intellectual hierarchy through the re-framing of girls’ achievement as an illusion; the notion that girls’ success results from the ‘seduction’ of teachers by the neat appearance of their work sets their attainment apart from that reflecting ‘genuine understanding’.

In a similar vein, Mendick (2005) argues that a system of inter-related, oppositional binaries marks feminine learning as synonymous with the ‘routine’ and ‘conventional’, and as inferior/meaningless when contrasted with ‘real understanding’. In the specific context of discussion about mathematics education,

Mendick found that the association of femininity with ‘neatness of presentation’, and masculinity with ‘genuine knowing’ was achieved through binaries positioning girls and boys respectively as ‘slow’ versus ‘rapid’ (where girls’ careful attention to practice and presentation was contrasted with boys’ ‘quick take-up’); as ‘dependent’ versus ‘independent’ (where girls’ adherence to routine was contrasted with boys’ creativity and ‘ownership’ of conceptual leaps); and as ‘reliant’ versus ‘self-regulating’ (where girls’ willingness to comply with tasks without understanding their use or significance was contrasted with boys’ ability to discriminate between important and unimportant learning tasks).

Indeed, the valorization of student self-regulation Mendick describes appears to have had a long-term relationship with the undervaluation of female success as reached via high performance in meaningless/peripheral tasks such as ‘presentation’ and ‘reproduction’. Walkerdine (1990) argues that this may, once again, be traced to gendered conceptualizations of ‘the child’ in the context of progressive pedagogies. Within such frameworks, Walkerdine explains that the normal child is held to reach genuine learning outcomes by way of active enquiry that is largely ‘self-determined’. In turn, submission to (and reliance upon) imposed routines and conventions has been pathologized, this style of learning outlawed for its relationship with outmoded oppressive and authoritarian pedagogies held to produce ‘unnatural’ modes of development. Like compliance, attention to conventions is therefore not celebrated as evidence of diligence, effort and care. Instead, these traits, although covertly *desired* by teachers as a means of ensuring smooth and easy classroom interactions, are officially ‘outlawed’, with neatness and rule-following deemed harmful to the development of ‘meaningful understanding’. The

paradoxical relationship between gender and attainment identified by Cohen (1998) is once again apparent in this context: the notion that girls are simply ‘neat and follow rules’ negates their success even as it is acknowledged, while boys’ *failure* to follow suit speaks to their *superior* connection with the broader meaning and significance of curricular principles and practices.

In Extracts 6 and 7, below, the notion that girls’ success reflects (meaningless) ‘neatness’ and ‘presentation skills’ works to undermine the authenticity of female attainment. Like ‘success-via-compliance’, success grounded in high performance on meaningless tasks is taken to signify a form of second-order achievement, as distinct from ‘real understanding’. In these accounts, girls’ *high* performance is linked to *low*- level skills in turning their effort and attention towards meaningful learning activities. Conversely, boys’ *under*performance is attributed to an *over*-zealous prioritization of meaningful activities, and tasks that are pivotal (rather than ‘peripheral’) to the achievement of learning outcomes.

In Extract 6, Griffith teachers Mr Willets and Miss Hopkins build a consensual account of boys’ orientation to meaningful and forward-looking learning, and of girls’ willingness to expend energy and attention on peripheral tasks and activities. This discussion arose in the context of comparison between all-male versus all-female classes with regard to the teaching of literacy.

Extract 6

CHAIR—Is the approach to literacy different in the two classes? Is one more structured, is one more phonetically based or are the approaches the same and it is just the context of the classroom that is different?

Mr Willetts—I can honestly say that I would not have changed much of how I am going about the literacy program or the maths program other than a few things that I have noticed, like the fact that the boys prefer working to a time limit rather than in the way of ‘Let’s work this for as long as it takes to get it to look pretty and presentable’. They would rather just work through it to a time limit, get it done and move on, instead of having to take them back all the time and say, ‘That’s great but let’s go back and revisit it over and over again.’

Miss Hopkins—Yes, boys will come in and see when something is finished, whereas girls could spend two weeks finishing something and you have to have a cut-off time. With a lot of the boys, I do not particularly hone in on things in literacy like their handwriting—if the work is done, I can read it, it is legible, they are happy and it is done well, then it is fine.

(Griffith, N.S.W. 1162)

In Extract 6, two primary dichotomous constructions serve to build the gendered nature of authentic and meaningful learning: the distinction between ‘peripheral skills’ and ‘real understanding’, and between those who are able/unable to *comprehend* this difference.

While Willetts’ initial statement alludes to overall similarities in gendered learning styles (from all-male to all-female classes, he explains that he “would not have changed much” of how he goes about teaching either maths or literacy), his presentation of the “few” differences he has “noticed” does important work in establishing disparate gendered connections with meaningful/authentic learning and achievement. His claim that “boys prefer working to a time limit” rather than working “for as long as it takes to get it to look pretty and presentable” is pivotal in this regard, building the superior authenticity of male students’ learning by way of two related contrasts.

Firstly, this statement constructs girls' attention as focused upon concerns external to 'actual learning' (making their work "pretty and presentable"), and portrays boys as oriented, in comparison, to 'no-frills' knowledge acquisition. Throughout the course of this extract, this contrast is elaborated; the outcome of girls' focus on presentation is depicted as distinct from *genuine attainment* (without attending to appearances, Willets explains that boys still "get it done") and from *significant achievement* (Hopkins, likewise, explains that boys' work can be poorly presented but nonetheless "done well"). In turn, the respective value of male versus female learning orientations is also established. While boys' are presented as honing their efforts toward accomplishing meaningful learning goals ("they would rather just work through it to a time limit, get it done, move on"), girls are portrayed as wasting time and energy on the peripheral (meaningless) aspects of academic tasks. Female students are depicted as keen to engage in repetition even after learning outcomes are achieved (Willets presents girls as willing to revisit work "over and over again"), and to give unwarranted amounts of time to second-order priorities (spending "as long as it takes" to make their work look "pretty and presentable").

The inferiority and inauthentic status of girls' orientation to 'meaningless' learning activities is not only depicted as a problem in the extract because it is taken to represent a 'waste of time'. More significantly, it is positioned as problematic because girls themselves are portrayed as *not being able to tell* that their effort is being expended in a 'meaningless' direction. Hopkins' claim that "girls could spend two weeks finishing something and you have to have a cut-off time" establishes this lack of insight, presenting girls as unable to distinguish between significant learning tasks and those that are entirely *insignificant*. This statement portrays girls as

reliant, the implication being that without an imposed “cut-off” time they are unable to self-regulate, and are liable to get lost in ‘endless repetition’. In contrast, boys are presented as able to distinguish (in an entirely independent manner) tasks involving meaningful knowledge acquisition from those that are ‘peripheral’ to core educational goals. Boys’ orientation to meaningful learning is established in the extract through reference to their preference for “working to a time limit” and their desire to “get it done and move on”, constructions that present them as decisive, forward-looking and able to prioritize significant opportunities to acquire ‘understanding’. The notion that this preference coincides with what *teachers* deem to be the meaningful aspects of learning (Hopkins’ appears to concur with boys’ academic priorities: “if the work is done, I can read it, it is legible, they are happy and it is done well, then it is fine”) affirms the notion that boys have a more mature connection with education than their female peers. In turn, the implication is that the outcomes boys reach are more *authentic*, their results reflecting an engagement with the broader significance of academic tasks rather than a perfunctory adherence to instruction and conventions.

By way of these constructions, the relationship between gender and achievement is, once again, established as somewhat paradoxical. Although female students’ current performance is acknowledged to be ‘high’, the emulation of their path to success is not advocated in Extract 6 as a means by which boys might reach comparable outcomes. Rather, the high levels of care, attention and presentation taken to characterize girls’ orientation to education (and the route to their success) are held to signify a *lack* of the attributes that distinguish ‘meaningful learning’, and to present their achievement, not as admirable, but ‘invalid’. Ultimately, the portrayal

of girls in the extract as unable to self-direct, to self-regulate or to connect with the value and implications of the tasks with which they engage undermines the authenticity of their ‘knowing’ *despite* their superior recorded attainment. Conversely, even in a context of their relative underachievement, boys’ status as more authentic learners is affirmed; their results, although limited, are held to reflect the self-regulation and insight taken to exemplify a genuine connection with learning and knowledge.

The notion that authentic learning requires the ability to connect with the broader significance of classroom activities, and to distinguish those tasks that provide genuine opportunities for knowledge acquisition, is also evident within the extract that follows. In Extract 7, the success girls are argued to achieve by way of careful attention to writing (in particular) is undermined by committee member Mr Wilkie and Griffith teacher Mr Everett as the inauthentic result of capacities girls do not actively, or *meaningfully*, choose to apply.

Extract 7

Mr WILKIE—there has been a suggestion that often in the assessment process now there is far more involved in an essay type situation. It would be, ‘Write an essay around a problem,’ rather than just have the problem itself that you would solve. The suggestion has been made that often boys have difficulty trying to do that in an exam situation because they are very good at doing a problem but not at putting it into an essay type context. That was one thing.

Mr Everett—I understand what you are saying. I also feel that there is a general trend with boys that they want to get in there and get it over and done with. They want to know where they are going. That is something that they find easier to do, whereas with girls there does tend to be a characteristic that would suggest that they are prepared to take more time, more care and give greater consideration particularly to a written task.

(Griffith, N.S.W. 1143)

As was the case in the previous extract, the distinction in Extract 7 between ‘significant learning tasks’ and those that are ‘second order’/‘peripheral’ is central to the establishment of boys’ academic outcomes as more authentic than those reached by girls. Mr Wilkie builds this contrast from the outset of the extract, constructing a difference between the *accomplishment* of an academic goal, and the *expression* of this achievement (“often in the assessment process now there is far more involved in an essay type situation. It would be, ‘Write an essay around a problem’, rather than just have the problem itself you would solve”).

Throughout the extract, written expression is constructed in this way as *external* to core learning goals. Wilkie, in particular, depicts essay writing as the “situation” or “context” in which understanding is expressed, something that goes “around” an answer rather than being a central part of it. In turn, boys’ poor performance with regard to writing (a peripheral aspect of learning) is positioned as educationally insignificant. As Wilkie argues, boys are often “very good at doing a problem” (a higher-order achievement held to reflect ‘true understanding’) but are simply less adept at “putting it into an essay type context” (a second-order priority). Everett builds a similar contrast to undermine the significance of boys’ inferior writing skills, contrasting the notion that boys “want to get in there and get it over and done with” with the claim that girls are “prepared to take more time, more care and give greater consideration particularly to a written task”. This statement also distinguishes writing from outcome achievement/knowledge acquisition: without attention to high-level expression boys still “get it over and done with”. These contrasts ultimately present boys’ underperformance as largely unproblematic (they

still succeed ‘where it counts’), and locate girls’ success within their capacity for passive compliance with meaningless, peripheral writing tasks.

A further binary that works in conjunction with the contrast between core and peripheral learning activities is that presenting a gendered distinction between tasks with which students have a ‘natural affinity’. This may be seen where boys are presented by Wilkie as finding essay writing “difficult”, and by Everett as finding tasks “easier” when they “know where they are going”. The ambivalent way in which this contrast is presented assigns boys’ ‘problem’ regarding essay writing a resoundingly *positive* valuation. Boys’ ‘failure’ to engage with meaningless tasks positions them favourably as oriented to ‘learning-in-action’, as forward-looking, and as connected with the broader significance of the efforts they make and knowledge they glean – the hallmarks of ‘authentic learning’.

Conversely, girls’ success with regard to writing tasks requiring malleability and compliance is undermined as the insignificant result of (feminine) qualities (they give “more time, more care and greater consideration, particularly to a written task”). These traits may be seen to reflect ‘stagnancy’ rather than ‘action’, and an adherence to the demands of classroom protocols rather than a genuine connection with the broader purposes of schooling. Whereas boys’ orientation to education reflects what they are held to *want* (the notion that boys “want to get in there and get it over and done with. They want to know where they’re going” presents this as an active, self-directed choice), girls’ success is taken to reflect a *reactive* orientation. Their success is not only undermined as meaningless/peripheral, but is presented as the result of nature (“a characteristic”) or compliance (“they are

prepared to give more time ... ”), explanations that each present girls’ achievement as inauthentic, and as something girls neither *own* nor genuinely *understand*. The upshot of each of these contrasts is that boys’ success is naturalized even in its absence (the implication is that their knowledge would inevitably see them reach high outcomes should peripheral tasks be given appropriate, low priority), while girls’ achievement is pathologized as inauthentic, and as reflecting both a lack of insight and the absence of a mature connection with learning.

5.6 Girls and boys as oriented to detail versus conceptual understanding

A fourth dominant binary identified within representations of gendered learners was that of female students as reaching success via ‘attention to detail’ and of boys as oriented, instead, to achievement via ‘conceptual mastery’. This dichotomy was closely related to the positioning of girls’ learning style and subsequent understandings as ‘concrete’, and those of boys as contrastingly ‘abstract’. By way of these binaries, witnesses to the Inquiry built a picture of girls as tending to pay careful attention to specific rules and processes, and of boys as ‘looking beyond’ the limitations of basic principles to reach a more authentic form of conceptual understanding.

The binary of attention to ‘detail’ versus ‘conceptual understanding’ was closely associated with each of the gendered dichotomies discussed in the preceding sections of analysis. Girls’ concentration upon detail was held to require time (passivity), rule-following (compliance) and a degree of automatic adherence to fine-grained conventions (engagement with ‘meaningless’ tasks). Conversely, in accounts of this kind, male students’ action, resistance and engagement with

meaning were traits argued to enable boys to reach 'conceptual understanding' – a kind of knowing deemed to be achieved via self-directed creativity, and as resulting in understandings that may be independently manipulated to reach further meaningful conclusions.

As was the case with the binaries of activity/passivity, compliance/resistance and meaningful/meaningless learning, gendered associations between 'attention to detail' and 'conceptual understanding' have long been noted. Michèle Cohen's (1998) historical analysis of this link draws upon a 1913 report into the benefits of co-education, in which it was argued that girls "brood" over academic details, while boys' "breezy attitude" prevents them from being 'morbidly diligent' and tied to conventional ideas.

Daston (1996) likewise, identifies a longstanding association, tracing the feminization of 'attention to detail' to a 19th Century shift in conceptualizations of the 'sexed mind'. While 17th and 18th Century understandings of the intellect attributed female 'imagination' and male 'speculative reason' to corporeal gender differences, Daston argues that a 19th Century reformulation condensed this polarity into an opposition between the female grasp of concrete details and male mastery of abstract principles. This opposition was grounded, not in the gendered body, but in the discrepancy between men's (expansive) and women's (limited) spheres of activity and experience, held, at that time, to be the foundation of intellectual development. Daston explains that the valuation of this gendered link was more firmly established in the mid-19th Century, when psychologists began to prioritize the notion of a single, over-arching 'intelligence' as opposed to a mind comprised of

various faculties. An important feature of this version of intelligence was an individual's capacity to draw general patterns and principles from the disparate details of experience; as such, Daston argues that this 'abstract' orientation to learning and knowledge became 'masculinized' to an even greater degree.

Walkerdine (1989) argues that the positioning of attention to detail as 'feminine' and abstract concepts as 'masculine' has maintained the gendered nature of valued, meaningful scholarship. She explains that the academic requirement of attention to detail has been negatively represented as a remnant of the 'artificial' and 'imposed' teaching practices deemed to impede 'natural' learning and enquiry. Walkerdine argues that attention to detail has been positioned as a practice on which students may develop an 'unhealthy reliance' that prevents them from developing the confidence required to 'make conceptual leaps'. As such, girls' careful attention to detail has been pathologized, while boys' refusal to engage with such considerations has been positioned as a 'natural' precursor to authentic learning outcomes.

In each of the extracts that follow, the notion that girls' achievement may be attributed to their attention to detail (another second-order consideration), rather than genuine conceptual mastery (deemed the only significant educational goal), once again positions their attainment as largely 'inauthentic'. Here, the separation of 'detail' from 'true knowledge acquisition' depicts girls' adherence to the minutiae of presentational rules and conventions as standing proxy for 'real understanding', giving their work the appearance of reason and deliberation but involving no initiative or ownership of ideas.

While boys' outcome results are acknowledged to be inferior, their intolerance of demands for detail is nonetheless taken as evidence that they are independent thinkers concerned with the broader significance of learning and meaning-making. Their results, while acknowledged to be limited in an 'official sense', are positioned as superior to those of girls in that they are taken to represent, not only knowledge acquisition, but the mastery and control of ideas and understandings, capacities held to be synonymous with authentic learning.

Extract 8 presents an interchange between Committee Member Mr Sawford and Griffith teacher Mr Hooper on the topic of gendered differences in students' connection with literacy.

Extract 8

Mr SAWFORD—Within the literacy framework, are there some aspects where boys in fact do better than the girls? Are they better at comprehension?

Mr Hooper—It is funny to say that from a whole school perspective—are you talking about our school, or are you talking about schools in general?

Mr SAWFORD—No, your own school—your own experience, basically.

Mr Hooper—I would say it depends on the particular child. I have got a stage three literacy group at the moment, and I have got some boys who are probably very strong in the comprehension side of things—probably stronger than the girls. I have got some boys who are stronger than the girls in oral reading, interpreting text and things like that. It really depends on the level of interest in what you are doing. Boys really like to be interested in what they are learning about. That is probably our key focus. If you are researching a particular novel or something like that, and it is not of interest to them, sometimes they do not put their full effort and attention into it. So I make a conscious effort to make sure that the material that we are doing in class is of interest.

(Griffith, N.S.W. 1147)

In his question at the start of Extract 8, Sawford sets up a gendered comparison with regard to “comprehension” performance, a central aspect of literacy involving the ability to understand and draw inferences from various classroom texts. In response, Hooper builds a representation of male learners’ good (and often *superior*) ability on this dimension, establishing boys’ engagement with the broad, conceptual and abstract aspects of meaningful, authentic learning.

Hooper’s presentation of “some” of his boys as “very strong in the comprehension side of things” works, first and foremost, to depict male students’ strengths as lying in areas of crucial academic significance. The relationship between ‘comprehension’ and ‘understanding’ positions this skill as a core educational objective, and sets ability in this area apart from capacities that result in second-order outcomes. This positive valuation is bolstered by Hooper’s list of boys’ specific, major abilities (“I have got some boys who are stronger than the girls in oral reading, interpreting text and things like that”) in that each of these abilities may be seen to bring connotations of authentic scholarship. While comprehension skills speak to ‘genuine understanding’, “oral reading” ability may be linked to confidence, independence and a capacity for making communicative sense of written material, and proficiency in “interpretation” taken as evidence that boys can produce, rather than simply *reproduce*, academic insights.

The notion that boys are better at the abstract, comprehension “side of things” builds the implication that they excel with regard to activities that involve active meaning-making, as opposed to those (presumably more feminine) tasks that require attention to the detail of concrete practices and adherence to established

procedures. While this contrast may be seen to establish a complementarity of male and female capacities, it seems that these gendered poles are not depicted as being of equal value. This can be seen most clearly in Hooper's contention that boys engage most effectively with literacy tasks when they are "of interest" to them; a construction that, once again, positions male learning as authentically 'conceptual'. The claim that boys must be interested affirms the notion that their connection and resultant success is at the level of engaged meaning-making, the implication being that girls' ability to connect in the absence of interest reflects their orientation to disengaged detail and procedure as opposed to deep understanding.

By way of this implicit distinction, the context of boys' underperformance in which this discussion arises is positioned in Extract 8 as unproblematic in two related ways. At one level, boys' inferior literacy results may be read as an artifact of a system of assessment that gives equal weight to the (primary) conceptual skills of 'understanding' and to the (secondary) skills associated with appropriate use of detail/procedure. The implication of this line of argument is that, although boys' overall recorded performance might be relatively low, they are actually *more* successful in 'the ways that count', as evidenced by their superior attainment where conceptual skills are required.

At another level, the representation of boys' underachievement is positioned in the extract as resulting from an inaccurate and unfair comparison: boys' low attainment is held to reflect, not relative inability, but the *choice* not to apply "effort and attention" in the absence of adequate interest and conceptual engagement. In this sense, boys' underperformance is, once again, inverted and positioned as

unproblematic. Indeed, here, boys' low attainment may be taken as evidence of an *admirable* decision not to give energy to tasks that require 'attention to detail' or 'reproduction' rather than the 'concepts' and 'speculation'/'induction' that are positioned as the hallmarks of both authentic learning and meaningful outcome knowledge.

A more explicit contrast between feminine 'attention to detail' and masculine 'preference for concepts' may be seen in Extract 9, below. In this instance, Committee Acting Chair Rod Sawford builds a purportedly neutral representation of these 'contrasting orientations', yet ultimately presents boys' engagement with abstract patterns and principles as proof of their *superior* connection with authentic scholarship.

Extract 9

ACTING CHAIR—About a month or six weeks ago I read some articles in the Spectator. There were a couple of articles about boys' education. It is interesting that the United Kingdom is much further down the track than the United States, Canada, New Zealand or us. I think they recognized the problems with comprehensive secondary education and boys' education around 1994. We are only just starting to grapple with it now. Madison Curry, who is a Professor of Philosophy at Oxford, made a comment in the Spectator. Basically he was talking to one of his colleagues about the distinctions that were given to the philosophy class. A young man and a young woman got equal distinctions. 'How did you do that?' he was asked. He replied, 'The girl missed the point but got all the details right; the boy got the main argument but was deficient in all the details.' That was an interesting way of doing it. But I thought afterwards, what a loss to both of them. In fact, I would have thought both of them had lost something.

(City Beach, W.A. 941)

In Extract 9, through reference to specific anecdotal evidence of differential gendered performance, the speaker establishes feminine attention to detail and

masculine attention to concepts as central to understanding what he describes as the broader “problem” with “boys’ education”.

The authority of this account is established, initially, through the category entitlement (Potter, 1996) of Sawford’s source, Madison Curry. Specific mention of Curry’s academic position (he is a “Professor of Philosophy at Oxford”) and geographical location (he is from the United Kingdom, where Sawford explains that researchers are “much further down the track” in recognizing and addressing problems with boys) builds the authority of his claims. In turn, the conclusion Sawford appears to draw from Curry’s example (that ‘detail’ and ‘understanding’ may be seen to cluster around opposing, gendered poles) attracts a heightened credibility.

In more specific terms, Sawford’s reference to the notion that Curry gave a male and a female student “equal distinctions” because “the girl missed the point but got all the details right” and the “boy got the main argument but was deficient in all the details” does significant work in Extract 9. Although Sawford appears to present this disparity in neutral terms as “a loss to both” of the students involved, his account of this anecdote may be seen, at another level, to establish the *non-equivalence* of these gendered strengths and shortcomings.

In explaining that Curry’s female student “missed the point but got all the details right”, Sawford defines ‘attention to particulars’ and ‘correct, conceptual engagement’ as opposite and discrete, a construction that positions the academic area in which this female student *did* achieve (provision of detail) as peripheral to

‘real understanding’. Consequently, the ostensible ‘complementarity’ of male and female capacities asserted by Sawford is undermined, and masculine strengths become more closely aligned with valuable, authentic learning.

This argument, and its resultant implication that ‘girls provide detail but boys understand’ may be seen to rest on a technique described as ‘ontological gerrymandering’, whereby an advantageous area of description is selected and formulated while others are ignored (Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985, extended by Potter, 1996). In defining “the point” as distinct from “the details”, Sawford may be seen to ‘gerrymander’ the argumentative terrain, selecting specific criteria to stand as evidence of understanding. This definition ensures that girls’ attention to detail is positioned as *external* to comprehension of “the main argument” rather than as a *central facet* of a thorough, comprehensive expression of knowledge. Further, the construction of a *singular* “point” that may or may not be grasped (Sawford allows for nothing in between) presents the prototypical female student of his anecdote as entirely disconnected from meaningful understanding (she missed “the” point; the “main argument”). On the other hand, Sawford’s construction of a *variety* of relevant “details” enables the male student of his example to be positioned as simply “deficient” in this area, as opposed to entirely ‘lacking’. In relation to a subject like philosophy, the specific context of the anecdote at issue, (feminine) failure to connect with central concepts and principles ultimately appears more problematic than the (masculine) failure to engage with details *explicitly depicted* as ‘peripheral’ to authentic understanding.

A further aspect of Extract 9 may be seen to undermine the purported 'equivalence' and 'complementarity' of feminine attention to detail and masculine connection with concepts. It could be argued that the speaker's example orients to the possibility that the male and female recipients of the "equal distinctions" described were not awarded this grade on the basis of their genuinely equivalent answers. Rather, it seems possible to infer from the retelling of this story that these results were conferred because equal gendered outcomes were desired, and therefore justified retrospectively. There are connotations of 'affirmative action' in the question Sawford explains was put to Curry after he awarded the results at issue ("How did you do that?" he was asked"). It may be argued that such a question implies that this outcome resulted from a strategic choice to put gender-symmetry (rather than assessment accuracy) at the forefront of concern. Likewise, Sawford's own interpretation of Curry's decision to position detail and understanding as equivalent ("That was an interesting way of doing it") implies that these results reflect something more than a neutral representation of achievement data.

Ultimately, it appears that Extract 9 builds a contrasting picture of 'detail' and 'understanding' in which the purported equivalence of these aspects of learning is subtly undermined. By gerrymandering the criteria against which authentic learning may be assessed, the speaker positions feminine 'attention to detail' as evidence of conceptual 'disconnection', and (possibly) as an orientation to learning associated with success for reasons unrelated to accuracy of assessment. Conversely, boys' 'failure to attend to fine-grained requirements' becomes evidence of their connection, not only with 'concepts', but with the *core goals* of the education process.

5.7 Girls and boys as successful via ‘manipulation’ versus ‘integrity’

A final gendered binary identified as central to representations of male versus female learners was that positioning girls’ success as the product of ‘manipulation’ and boys’ outcomes as the result of their ‘integrity’.

While accounts in each of the previous sections generally worked implicitly to depict feminine learning orientations as inauthentic, accounts employing the dichotomy of manipulation/integrity were explicit in their negative valuation of what was described as female students’ ‘calculating’ route to success. In building such arguments, witnesses to the Inquiry positioned feminine passivity, compliance, neatness and attention to detail as practices employed by girls, not because they are *unable* to engage with more meaningful methods, but because they *know* such behaviours will see them reach greater success. Speakers establishing accounts of this kind did not position female learners positively as directing their efforts toward considered, pragmatic, outcome-oriented styles of learning. Instead, girls were depicted as ‘manipulating’ teachers into belief of their superior ability through engagement with superficially effective, but ultimately inauthentic, learning tasks and behaviours.

Conversely, boys’ limited achievement was valorized in these accounts as authentic and transparent, as evidenced by their refusal to engage with ‘disingenuous’ strategies that result in inauthentic attainment.

Accounts employing the binary of manipulation/integrity were less pervasive across the corpus than those drawing upon the other gendered dichotomies analyzed thus far, and may be seen to deviate from the preceding accounts on two significant dimensions. Firstly, as has been mentioned, they provided an explicitly negative evaluation of female styles of learning, a feature whose absence in each of the previous extracts speaks to the cultural salience of ‘political correctness’.

In addition, accounts contrasting feminine ‘manipulation’ and masculine ‘integrity’ stand out in their positioning of girls as *agentic*. Whereas, in each of the preceding sections, girls were depicted as malleable (passive/compliant) and as oriented to insignificant aspects of the broader classroom picture (attention to detail; compliance with meaningless tasks), accounts of female students’ ‘manipulation’ suggested discernment, power and control. In representations of this kind, feminine passivity and compliance were depicted as self-directed, strategic, and as oriented to the achievement of big-picture success – signs of insight and conceptual connection with the broader location, and significance, of school.

Yet although these representations attribute girls the agency and self-regulation linked, in preceding extracts, to ‘authentic learning’, they may ultimately be seen to reproduce the *same* gendered positionings, relative to ‘genuine scholarship’, as observed in the previous sections.

In Extract 10, to follow, the (non-stereotypically feminine) agency and self-direction attributed to girls are undermined because of the form their ‘manipulation’ takes: the strategic, and ‘deceptively effective’, use of rote-learning. In this extract,

the notion that girls achieve an invalid form of success through memorization rather than understanding once again negates their achievement (and the value of the agency from which it arises) at the moment it is announced.

As Walkerdine (1990) has explained, rote-learning has been maligned within progressive education models as a tool of out-dated, totalitarian teaching frameworks that have historically mystified students, encouraging them to follow rules without understanding why these rules were effective. She contends that modern pedagogies, the goal of which has been to produce a rationally ordered democracy, have outlawed rote-learning, holding that real understanding is reached by “learning through activity rather than chanting tables” (p.33). In this sense, then, any positive connotations of female students’ agentic choice to use a method that brings them the results they desire are undermined by the inauthenticity of the form of that strategy – the practice of rote-learning, taken to reflect academic immaturity and disconnection from ‘real understanding’.

In the final extract presented for analysis, Extract 11, girls’ ‘strategic’ route to attainment is less scathingly critiqued. This extract presents girls as actively applying strategies for achievement because they are reliant on educational success as a means of expanding their options for employment. Such an account positions girls as both active and insightful, and may even be read as an acknowledgement of the continuing marginalization of women in the workforce. Indeed, this line of argument echoes claims made by feminists who contend that girls’ motivation to succeed reflects their higher investment in school given that women’s options

beyond education (training, entry to the core labour market) are fewer than those open to their male counterparts (Kenway *et al.*, 1997; Foster, 1994).

However, the apparently authentic agency and insight attributed to girls in Extract 11 is, once again, undermined on the grounds that it takes an inauthentic *form*. While girls' outcomes in the extract are acknowledged to be both valid and high, the means by which they are achieved are constructed as resulting from inauthentic processes of conformity, compliance and, more significantly, 'sucking up'. Ultimately, the value attached to girls' active pursuit of outcomes is negated by what is presented as the 'duplicity' of their tactics, behaviours of which boys are deemed largely 'incapable'.

Thus, while they employ some non-stereotypical gendered attributions, Extracts 10 and 11 ultimately reproduce the same disjunction between femininity and genuine learning that has been evident throughout this chapter.

In both of these extracts, even though girls are acknowledged to be reaching high standards of achievement by agentic and self-directed means, female scholarship is nonetheless positioned as inauthentic. Here, this 'inauthenticity' is not evidenced by 'inaccuracies'/'skewed priorities' in recorded attainment, or necessarily by faults in conceptual understanding, as was the case in the preceding nine accounts. Rather, in the final two extracts, the inauthentic nature of girls' attainment is established retrospectively as a result of the *way in which these outcomes were achieved*, evidence of which is imputed from students' demonstration of characteristics taken

to represent a ‘real learner’ – characteristics demonstrated by the preceding analysis as synonymous with *male* scholarship.

Extract 10

Dr Bruce—I think concepts are more important to boys. I do not think they have the same capacity to rote learn. You would have experienced marking exam questions. You can tell whether a student has rote learned the answer—not all of them, because some of them are very good at it, but every now and then with a rote learned answer you see there is a conflict in the argument and they do not see it because they have rote learned it. You can also see the student who understands the concepts—they might not have them fully correct but there is a flow in it and the argument is all there. Boys are much better at that. I think we all go through a stage of rote learning, but I think girls hang onto it for longer—it is a winning strategy so it is difficult to get them to change.

(Melbourne, Vic. 170)

As was the case in many of the previous accounts, Extract 10 may be seen to characterize girls as disconnected from ‘real understanding’ and boys as naturally oriented to concept-driven learning. Unlike the preceding extracts, however, female students’ engagement with ‘meaningless’ learning activities is presented, not as something they simply ‘cannot help’, but as a tactic girls *deliberately* employ and to which their success may be largely attributed. Through his claim that “rote learning” is girls’ “winning strategy”, Bruce may be seen, at one level, to position female students as engaged in an insightful, pragmatic and ultimately successful interaction with specific learning tasks and with schooling more generally – they are strategically employing practices that bring them rewards. Yet what could be seen as a cleverly chosen, *authentic* course of academic action is eventually undermined on the grounds that it is ‘disingenuous’ in *form*. The manifestation of girls’ insight and strategy in “rote learning” is taken to negate the value of their agency and

outcomes through the depiction of this method as inauthentic, immature and as evidence of ‘deception’ as opposed to ‘academic integrity’.

From the outset of Extract 10, Bruce classifies rote learning as the province of female students, a definition provided implicitly by way of a gendered contrast. Boys are depicted as actively oriented to conceptual engagement (“I think concepts are more important to boys”) and as naturally equipped to learn in this way (“I do not think they have the same capacity to rote learn”). These constructions position female students as comparatively ‘disengaged’ from concepts, by choice *and* by nature, and as therefore predisposed to learning by rote.

Once aligned with femininity, the inauthentic nature of rote learning is established through reference to three related binaries, each of which is depicted as comprising gendered dimensions. Firstly, rote learning is associated with conceptual “conflict” as opposed to the argumentative “flow” that signals ‘true understanding’. Bruce explains that “every now and then with a rote learned answer you see there is a conflict in the argument”, a situation he contrasts with the learning style of boys: “You can also see the student who understands the concepts—they might not have them fully correct but there is a flow in it and the argument is all there. Boys are much better at that”. By way of this claim, conceptual understanding (positioned as the only authentic upshot of learning) is defined *as distinct* from outcomes reached by the rote learning practices girls are ‘naturally equipped’ to employ.

Bruce bolsters the inauthentic status of rote learning practices by aligning them with academic immaturity. His claim that “we all go through a stage of rote learning, but

I think girls hang onto it for longer” is central in this regard, positioning girls as reliant on strategies that *precede* understanding in the hierarchy of academic ‘development’.

The notion that girls “hang on” to rote learning because it brings them (limited) success is depicted as evidence of immaturity and disconnection from the ‘true’ purposes of schooling. Despite the fact it is held to bring them success (for girls, rote learning is a “winning strategy”) it is nonetheless positioned as a technique from which teachers must urge girls to move on; while Bruce argues that it is “difficult” to get female students “to change”, there is no question that efforts *should* be made in this direction.

A final means by which the inauthenticity of rote learning is established is the depiction of this method as ‘deceptive’. This is evident, to a degree, in Bruce’s depiction of this method as a “strategy”, but is more explicit in his claim that teachers can not always tell “whether a student has rote learned the answer” because “some of them are very good at it”. At the heart of this assertion is the notion that girls’ ‘mimicking’ of outcome knowledge is a means of *deceiving* their teachers into the belief that they have reached the goal of genuine understanding.

What is deemed problematic in this account is not the *actual outcomes reached* in and of themselves – indeed, the notion that teachers can tell a rote-learned answer from one based in understanding only “every now and then” suggests that the responses provided via these alternative routes may be largely indistinguishable. Rather, on the grounds that only conceptual understanding *can* lead to ‘genuine

success', this account holds that outcomes are problematic when judged in hindsight as having been achieved via inauthentic *means*, such as the practice of rote learning.

A paradoxical relationship between gender and authentic achievement is, therefore, once again established in Extract 10. At one level, when boys' attainment is lower than that of girls, their outcomes are nonetheless deemed superior; the notion that they get 'some details wrong' taken as evidence of mature, conceptual learning ("You can ... see the student who understands the concepts—they may not have them fully correct but there is a flow in it and the argument is all there. Boys are much better at that"). Where boys' and girls' answers can *not* be distinguished in terms of outcomes achieved, male responses are *also* positioned as superior evidence of 'genuine understanding'. When gendered outcomes can not be differentiated, their authenticity is policed retrospectively; it is imputed from the very qualities of masculine learners that boys' outcomes reflect 'sincere' learning and engagement (as Bruce explains, "they do not have the same capacity to rote learn"), and that girls' success reflects the manipulation and immaturity for which their capacity is 'naturally high'.

Ultimately, irrespective of outcomes, and the agency through which they are reached, the authenticity of boys' methods and outcomes is naturalized while that of girls is undermined. This is achieved via retrospective analysis of how closely students' practices reflect 'authentic scholarship', an orientation to education associated, explicitly, with the 'learning style' of boys.

In Extract 11, below, the agency of girls who reach success via strategic learning practices is similarly dissociated from the realm of authentic scholarship. Once again, this is achieved, not by finding fault with female students' outcomes, but by undermining the authenticity of the methods by which they are achieved. In Extract 11, although girls are deemed 'deserving' of the strong results they obtain, the duplicity of their tactics may be seen to undermine the integrity and value of this achievement.

This extract follows a question from Committee member Julia Gillard as to factors that might explain the shift in gendered achievement patterns observed over the last 20 years. In his response, Education academic Mr Slade isolates what he presents as the two most important issues in this regard. The first, he argues, relates to the characteristics of those who make up the teaching profession. The second, as he explains below, relates to changing perceptions of gendered reliance on school.

Extract 11

Mr Slade—The other one is that the girls, the boys believe, feel the same way. They just have to comply, they have to conform, they have no other option. They have been pumped up to take a place in the workforce, which is fine. The boys are entirely happy with that. They bear no resentment whatsoever to the girls and they see no reason why they should not get everything they are working for. They are working hard and they deserve it. That is their view. The girls, they say, are working hard, are sucking up where necessary, they are doing what they are told. They are getting the work done because they do not have any other option.

(Adelaide, S.A. 884)

In Extract 11, Education academic Slade builds an account in which a relationship between schooling and social/political gendered power asymmetries is explicitly acknowledged. Girls' disproportionate reliance on school, evidenced by the notion

that they have “no other option” but to succeed academically if they are to “take a place in the workforce”, is depicted as a fact boys understand, and for which they bear girls “no resentment whatsoever”.

This acknowledgement, and the notion that girls “deserve” the results they achieve, could be seen to depict female students as insightful, authentic learners who are responding to social inequities by making active and effective use of school. Yet, the insight and agency that might allude to such ‘authenticity’ are undermined at the moment they are noted. In explaining boys’ view of female students’ success, Slade positions this achievement as something into which girls have been ‘pushed’, arguing that they have been “pumped up” (presumably by feminist educators) to “take a place in the workforce”. Female agency is also eroded in his claim that girls “have no other option” but to achieve success at school, a construction that acknowledges female marginalization but downplays the active choice to overcome it girls’ success may represent.

In addition to undermining any sense of agency underlying female students’ results, the authenticity of girls’ outcomes is subverted on the grounds that they are achieved via manipulative means. While female achievement could have been attributed the hallmarks of authenticity on Slade’s own grounds (the notion that girls are “getting the work done because they have no other option” could position them as insightful, engaged and successful), it is presented instead as a consequence of (inauthentic) ‘duplicity’.

Although he does not depict girls' achievements as deficient in themselves ("They are getting the work done"), Slade *retrospectively* undermines the authenticity of these outcomes, depicting them as the result of compliance ("they have to comply"), conformity ("they have to conform") and the seduction of teachers ("The girls...are working hard, are sucking up where necessary"). This description presents female students' route to success as both 'artificial' (reliant upon second-order capacities for compliance and conformity as opposed to 'genuine connection with learning') and morally questionable (grounded in manipulative teacher-pleasing tactics rather than legitimate knowledge acquisition).

The implication of Extract 11 is that, while girls' reliance on school is an understandable consequence of social inequalities, the means by which they face this problem renders their eventual success inauthentic. Girls' manipulative learning practices, while acknowledged to be 'necessary', are depicted as less than admirable, representing a 'means-to-an-end' orientation to schooling disconnected from educational ideals. Despite explaining that girls are "working hard" and "deserve" their success, Slade's account ultimately works to position girls' success as 'ill-gotten', the value of their achievements inverted as a result of the methods by which they were reached. Conversely, the *absence* of male students' achievement, and boys' willingness to acknowledge and accept girls' superior performance, depicts boys as *possessing* academic integrity and moral superiority. Although boys' capacity to display authentic learning behaviours could be argued to reflect a freedom that is a male 'gender dividend' (Connell, 1995) within patriarchal relations, in Extract 11 it appears to be valorized as an inherently masculine strength. The notion that boys are maintaining academic authenticity 'to their peril',

while their female peers capitalize upon manipulative ‘tactics’, may be seen to bolster the intrinsic value and authenticity of masculine learning styles – the valorization of which reproduces the system of gender relations by which boys’ success is naturalized, and that of girls’ is pathologized, in spite of achievement evidence to the contrary.

5.8 Discussion

Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis investigated dominant accounts of male underachievement as the result of factors external to boys themselves (inadequate teachers; skewed curriculum). In contrast, Chapter 5 turned the analytic focus back to the construction of schoolboy masculinities, an area of concern argued by Cohen (2004, 1998) to have been protected from meaningful scrutiny within debate about boys’ failure.

The aim of this chapter was to examine the representations of gendered learners offered by witnesses to the Inquiry. Given that constructions of ‘how boys are’ were central to accounts of ‘how boys should be helped’, analysis aimed to interrogate these representations in terms of their consequences for reform, and the subject positions they (currently and potentially) afford male students.

It was shown that dominant characterizations of male and female students depended upon a set of relational contrasts. These contrasts worked to associate masculinity and femininity (constructed as dichotomous categories) with the contrasting poles of unequally valued learning behaviours – the valorized dimensions of which were invariably deemed to be traits of *male* learners. Via the binary logic of these

explanatory accounts, the dimension of authentic versus inauthentic learning was subsumed into this sense-making system, its poles attributed similarly gendered valuations. Ultimately, it was suggested that this pattern of valorizing boys as authentic learners, even in the absence of high performance outcomes, may function to *reproduce* the problem of boys' underachievement.

The first binary discussed in this chapter was that depicting boys as inherently 'active' and girls as naturally 'passive' within the learning process. Accounts drawing on this dichotomy explained gendered achievement differentials as a result of the incompatibility of boys' 'orientation to action' and the passivity required in traditional classroom settings. While speakers acknowledged that boys' predisposition for active learning did not tend to result in high recorded attainment, this preference was nonetheless ascribed a positive valuation. Masculine 'activity' was associated with creative, co-operative and practical academic engagement – styles of learning held to be synonymous with 'authentic' scholarship. The authenticity of girls' success, argued to result from female students' reproductive, individualistic and submissive learning style, was contrastingly undermined.

Extracts 1-3, grounded in dichotomous representations of boys' activity versus girls' passivity, were provided as examples of an explanatory pattern that was pervasive across the corpus and had considerable 'common sense' appeal. Significantly, however, these accounts were shown to establish a contradictory discursive framework through which sense was made of male versus female learning and achievement.

On one hand, these extracts acknowledged ‘a problem with boys’ – the failure of this group serving as the taken-for-granted catalyst for discussion in this context. Yet, on the other, the underachievement of male students was deemed to be ‘no problem at all’, and boys’ failure (linked to an unwavering commitment to active engagement) was positioned as *proof* of academic ‘authenticity’. While girls’ currently high performance was held to have resulted from their ‘passive’ learning style, emulation of this approach was not advocated as a means of improving *boys’* rates of success. Instead, male students were celebrated for failing to employ the (inauthentic) passive techniques that lead to girls’ ‘limited’ attainment. These accounts held that to follow girls’ route to success would be for boys to ‘lower their standards’ – standards that would see them achieve to even *greater* heights in ideal classroom settings where authentic engagement is appropriately encouraged and rewarded.

It was shown that this paradoxical pattern of accounting went further than the arguments addressed in the preceding analytic chapters, where causes of male underachievement were externalized and boys’ failure deemed to be ‘no problem’. Within Extracts 1-3, boys’ underperformance was depicted, not only as unproblematic, but as evidence of *superior* academic potential. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, such an explanatory framework reflects the historical pattern, identified by Cohen, through which boys’ low (and girls’ high) attainment has been routinely ‘explained away’. In these accounts, by way of an essentialized alignment between masculinity and authentic scholarship, the capacity of boys was naturalized *despite* their current failure, and that of girls pathologized despite their manifest achievement.

This paradox was also evident within accounts drawing upon binary representations of boys as resistant and girls as compliant. In these accounts, where ‘rule breaking’ was held to be synonymous with ‘genuine understanding’, girls’ achievement via submission was taken to signify an *artificial* kind of attainment. Analysis of Extracts 4-5 demonstrated that girls’ achievement-via-compliance was held to reflect ‘second-order process skills’ (as opposed to actual content knowledge), and to result in a correspondingly second-order form of success. In contrast, boys’ resistance to classroom demands for compliance (taken to explain their current poor performance) was depicted as proof of their capacity for greater, more authentic achievement when they are allowed to ‘engage’, rather than forced to ‘submit’. Ultimately, in these accounts, boys’ present-day underperformance was taken to hold the promise of *future success* in the context of ideal assessment priorities. In turn, girls’ contemporary achievement was undermined as the consequence of flawed assessment practices rewarding ‘obedience and conformity’ above ‘genuine understanding’.

The construction of girls versus boys as oriented to ‘meaningless’ versus ‘meaningful’ learning also established a contradictory framework for making sense of gendered achievement. Through accounts building a distinction between (meaningless) ‘presentation skills’ and (meaningful) ‘real understanding’, girls’ success was once again depicted as the inauthentic product of second order capacities. In Extracts 6-7, female students’ achievements were attributed to their good performance in areas peripheral to conceptual connection with academic content – held to be the core goal of schooling. In these accounts, girls’ high performance was linked to a low-level ability to discern and engage with

meaningful learning activities. Conversely, boys' *under*performance was linked to a *superior* ability to prioritize tasks that are central to authentic conceptual engagement.

The success of female students was similarly downgraded within accounts based upon representations of girls as oriented to 'detail' and boys to 'conceptual understanding'. In these accounts, boys' intolerance of demands for detail was taken to represent an active, and authentic, academic choice. Rather than engaging blindly with set procedures (adherence to which would bring them 'good results'), boys were characterized as concerned with the conceptual significance of learning and meaning-making. Boys' achievements, while officially inferior to those of girls, were positioned as superior in terms of authenticity. Where girls' success was taken to reflect adherence to convention, boys' (largely unrecognized) learning outcomes were held to reflect mastery and control of concepts – capacities constructed as synonymous with authentic scholarship.

The final binary presented for analysis was that characterizing girls and boys, respectively, as successful via 'manipulation' versus 'integrity'. This dichotomy was identified less often than the other binaries discussed, and was shown to function differently in evaluating the authenticity of gendered learning styles. Unlike the other accounts investigated, representations employing the binary of manipulation/integrity made *explicitly* negative evaluations of girls' route to academic success. In these arguments, 'passivity', 'compliance' and 'attention to detail' were not depicted as behaviours employed by girls because they 'simply do not know any better'. Rather, they were constructed as practices employed as a

strategic means of achieving high results. Yet the agency of female students (the *lack* of which was deemed a key feature of girls' inauthentic learning in the extracts previously discussed) was attributed no value within these accounts. Speakers did not position girls positively as pragmatic and outcome-oriented learners, but as students who manipulate teachers into belief of their ability through engagement with 'inauthentic' tasks. Paradoxically, boys' limited performance was attributed *superior* authenticity within these accounts, as evidenced by their refusal to engage with 'disingenuous' learning strategies that result in an achievement 'façade'.

In this chapter, accounts of 'what it is to be a male or female learner' established a paradoxical relationship between gender and achievement. On the one hand, female students' demonstrable success was undermined as the result of 'second-order skills' to which girls are 'naturally predisposed'. On the other, boys' underperformance was repackaged as proof of potential for even greater, more authentic achievement when educational conditions are ideal. These representations worked to *naturalize* boys' achievement (even in its absence), and to *pathologize* that of girls, through the conflation of 'authentic scholarship' with a masculine orientation to learning. As was explained in the introduction to this chapter, such explanatory accounts reflect a well-documented pattern through which an intellectual gender hierarchy has historically been produced and maintained.

The consequences of the contradictory discursive framework identified in this chapter are significant for both male and female students.

Despite their significant advances, the depiction of female achievement as inauthentic may be seen to reproduce, and naturalize, historical patterns through which girls have been excluded from the realm of valued scholarship. As was argued in the 1980s:

It seems that no matter what the girls do, however hard they try they will never receive the ultimate accolade of recognition of their mastery ... and the very recognition they do receive, ultimately denies mastery because of the context"

(Adams & Walkerdine, 1986: 124).

It is telling that this comment, written in a context of female students' (mathematical) *underperformance*, resonates with the findings presented in this chapter. Indeed, as Walkerdine (1998) has argued more recently, it is indicative of a cultural investment in the achievement of boys that the same constructions of girls' inferior academic capacity that once served to explain their *failure* (girls are 'just neat'; they are 'just compliant') are now being used to undermine their success.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the discursive construction of female students as non-intellectual appears central to understandings of 'what it means to be a girl'. On the basis of this connection, the factual status of girls' academic inferiority may be (and, it seems, *has been*) maintained regardless of shifts in gendered attainment. In turn, it appears that female students' capacity to understand themselves as 'legitimate knowers' continues to be constrained *despite* their educational success. This pattern, identified elsewhere (Jones & Jacka, 1995), has considerable implications with regard to the continuing de-valuation of female contributions within academic and broader socio/economic spheres.

In more pragmatic terms, it seems that the naturalization of boys' success and girls' failure will continue to position school practices and priorities that do not result in male achievement as 'educationally inadequate'. Where female students' learning styles are deemed inauthentic, it follows that methods rewarding achievements reached in this manner are 'academically flawed' and require revision. A potential consequence of this kind of account, therefore, is that girls' success will become the (unacknowledged) catalyst for educational reform. Within this framework, interventions inevitably resulting in heightened outcomes for boys may be positioned as a necessary means of 'raising academic standards', and attention deflected from their role in exacerbating gender inequalities.

For boys, the paradoxical relationship between gender and achievement appears to have equally significant consequences. It seems that accounts serving both to critique and valorize masculine ways of being may work to reinforce established patterns of gendered connection with school, restricting the leverage of efforts aimed at improving boys' performance. While boys' *underachievement* is positioned as proof of *superior* potential, and *valued* masculinity, what incentive exists for male students to *change* their educational engagement? As much as teachers might foster the belief that it is 'cool to work hard at school', can they expect male students to increase their effort when to be a boy is to 'succeed without trying' - and when hard work renders any results achieved 'feminine' and, therefore, 'inauthentic'? It appears that boys' options for success at school will continue to be limited as long as their rejection of 'feminine' (expressive, diligent) means of connecting with learning is, not only celebrated for its 'authenticity', but depicted as 'appropriately male'.

As Pat Mahoney (1998) has argued, within frameworks for reform oriented to *accommodating* a natural, hegemonic ‘boyiness’

key questions concerning the role of schools in the social construction of masculinities are omitted; the practices and consequences of different masculinities in relation to women become invisible; and the effects on different groups of boys of the internal orderings of masculinities are obscured (p.36).

It seems that such accounts are therefore implicated in the problem they aim to solve, in that they naturalize, celebrate and reproduce a disjunction between the successful performance of (a dominant version of) masculinity and successful engagement with school.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of analytic chapters

This thesis has explored dominant explanatory accounts of boys' underachievement generated within a Public Inquiry into the Education of Boys. Analysis illustrated that discursive patterns through which male underperformance has historically been 'explained away' (Cohen, 1998) were reproduced in this contemporary context. More specifically, analysis highlighted the fine detail of rhetorical practices that served to naturalize an association between masculinity and academic success – even in the absence of high male achievement.

By way of accounts depicting boys' failure as the result of inadequate teachers and curriculum, it was shown that speakers refrained from implicating male students with regard to their own poor performance. Indeed, it was argued that the construction of boys' failure as the result of external conditions worked to naturalize their capacity for *success* when the instruction they receive is 'appropriate'.

Following Cohen (1998), it was argued that explanatory frameworks turning the gaze of accountability upon teachers and curriculum functioned to protect male underachievement from meaningful scrutiny. It was shown that such accounts deflected attention from the ways in which practices of masculinity impact upon educational success – and from the ways in which naturalized accounts of male potential work to *constrain* boys' options for active, and effective, engagement with school.

The discursive approach of this thesis enabled accounts of boys' failure as the result of poor teaching and inappropriate curriculum (explanatory patterns identified by Cohen across various historical junctures) to be analyzed with regard to the rhetorical structure and ideological function of their contemporary, local accomplishment.

6.1.1 Summary: boys' underachievement as the fault of 'inadequate teachers'

Chapter 3 provided a critical investigation into accounts of teachers as responsible for the underachievement of boys. In this section, attention was focused upon constructions of male students' 'immutable' learning 'needs' and 'styles', and to the circular arguments that positioned the (comparative) flexibility of teachers as the only available means of improving boys' rates of success.

The first repertoire identified in this chapter was that which positioned teachers as the 'critical factor' with regard to boys' academic performance. In accounts of this kind, the construction of teachers as able to 'make or break' boys' achievement heightened educators' responsibility for boys' failure, positioning male students themselves as reactive, rather than agentic, within the learning process. While constructions of teacher responsibility were used to manage personal accountability (educators could argue that their own practice was critically *beneficial* to male students in their care), it was shown that they served to attribute boys' failure, more generally, to *other* teachers' inadequate practice. It was argued that such accounts reproduced the notion that boys' achievement is something for which teachers are ultimately responsible – a construction locating the cause and potential solution to

boys' underachievement problem within educators themselves, rather than in the critical appraisal of classroom masculinities.

The second repertoire discussed positioned teachers as responsible for male students' poor performance if they fail to 'acknowledge' or 'diagnose' boys' specific learning 'needs'. Once again, circular arguments were identified within accounts depicting male students' positive response to 'boy-friendly' strategies as evidence of an inherent *need* for interventions of this kind. It was argued that the mutually supporting notions of boys' 'inherent learning requirements' and of teachers' obligation to provide 'differentiated provision' served to reify and accommodate a specific version of male needs, abstracted from the political and social location of constructions of 'boys' nature'.

A third pervasive repertoire was linked to the second, building the notion that teachers are responsible for adapting their practice so as to *address* boys' learning requirements. The moral necessity to accommodate boys' needs was established within accounts holding teachers responsible for shaping their (ideally flexible, responsive) methods to suit boys' (inflexible) learning styles. It was shown that the depiction of boys' needs as beyond their control, and of their achievement as inevitable where teaching is appropriate, enabled boy-friendly pedagogy to be established as an equity intervention. The implications of such constructions were argued to be significant, in that they positioned *all* boys as necessarily 'needy'. This representation was shown to obfuscate the impact of factors such as race and social advantage on patterns of achievement, and the fact that boys already receive a disproportionate share of educational resources.

The final repertoire identified in Chapter 3 positioned teachers as obliged to be ‘active’ in educating boys. Conventional, didactic methods, held to ‘suit’ female students, were presented as inadequate for boys, whose learning style was argued to bring with it a preference for dynamic activities. Where ‘default’ teaching methods were held to favour girls, and to represent lazy and unresponsive educational practice, boy-friendly methods were established as synonymous with teacher professionalism. In turn, strategies targeted towards raising boys’ achievement could be depicted as examples of informed and ‘equitable’ practice – a construction obscuring the political implications of such gendered interventions.

In conclusion, Chapter 3 argued that accounts positioning teachers as ‘to blame’ for boys’ underachievement reproduced notions of teacher accountability that work to discipline (particularly female) teachers, and to support a system-wide orientation to outcomes as the central goal of schooling. Such accounts were also shown to reify constructions of male students’ learning ‘needs’, enabling strategies targeted at raising boys’ achievement to be subsumed within the ostensibly gender-neutral rhetoric of ‘standards raising’ and ‘equitable provision’.

6.1.2 Summary: boys’ underachievement as the result of ‘inappropriate curriculum’

In Chapter 4, the first repertoire identified positioned ‘gender-discriminatory’ curriculum and assessment as to blame for boys’ underachievement. This repertoire centred around the notion that male and female students possess distinct capacities to which academic materials and testing procedures may be disproportionately ‘suited’. Within it, boys were argued to be ‘disadvantaged’ by the current cross-

curricular focus on literacy skills and continuous assessment – areas in which they were held to display less ‘natural aptitude’ than their female peers.

In this section, it was shown that the construction of inherent, gendered capacities functioned in two primary ways to establish boy-oriented curriculum reform as an educational imperative. Firstly, it was argued that content and testing ‘skewed towards’ female strengths has served to place boys at an achievement handicap, whilst ‘giving’ girls their success. Curricular reform for boys was advocated, on these grounds, as a means both of redressing discrimination *and* of ensuring accurate results. Secondly, the repertoire of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ worked to position contemporary curriculum and testing emphases as having ‘set boys up to fail’. Through the construction of boys’ in/capacities as obvious and unchanging, teachers and policy makers were held responsible for employing literacy-rich curricula that they ‘must have known’ would result in male underperformance. The notion that educators have employed girl-friendly methods *in full knowledge* of their discriminatory potential served to position teachers as morally responsible for boys’ failure, and for remedying the ‘inequity’ by which it was caused.

A second repertoire identified in this chapter depicted the underachievement of boys as the result of a ‘feminization’ of curriculum argued to have occurred over the past two decades. It was shown that speakers drew upon historical narratives to establish barriers to the participation and success of female students as a ‘thing of the past’.

Through a framework of ‘presumptive equality’ (Cox, 1995), in which a current symmetry of gendered power was assumed and ongoing inequalities absented,

speakers depicted continuing efforts aimed at meeting the needs of girls as necessarily 'discriminatory'.

'Feminization' accounts were also shown to position female students' current achievements as evidence that feminist interventions have been *entirely* successful – to the point that 'the pendulum is now swinging back'. Through constructions of symmetry associated with this pendulum metaphor, boys' contemporary underperformance was depicted as a gender disadvantage *equivalent* to that once faced by girls, and requiring equivalent remedial efforts.

In summary, it was argued that accounts linking boys' underachievement to 'curricular feminization' had serious implications for educational gender equity. Accounts of boys as disadvantaged by 'feminized curriculum' were argued to reduce equity concerns from a consideration of access, participation and the social location of schooling to a simple comparison of gendered performance outcomes. Constructions of this kind were shown to deflect attention from the advantage boys continue to experience with regard to post-school educational and employment opportunities. It was argued that accounts of boys as 'disadvantaged' by curriculum are likely to exacerbate *ongoing* inequalities, justifying a renewed focus on male students' interests as part of a re-appropriated 'equity' agenda.

6.1.3 Summary: the construction of gendered learners

As outlined in the preceding summaries, Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis illustrated that the dominant mode of accounting for boys' poor performance was to attribute responsibility for the problem to factors external to boys themselves. As Cohen

(1998) has explained, accounts blaming teachers and curriculum for boys' underachievement reflect a historical pattern through which a 'fiction of boys' potential' has been reproduced and maintained – a circumstance she argues has had detrimental consequences for male *and* female students. The broad scope of Cohen's observations informed a more nuanced investigation of contemporary constructions of boys' failure as the 'result' of educational conditions. Attention to rhetorical structure and ideological implications facilitated analysis of such accounts, highlighting specific notions of teacher accountability and 'presumptive gender equality' at the heart of these representations.

According to Cohen (1998), accounts locating the cause (and solution) of boys' poor performance within teaching and academic content have, for many years, deflected attention from the role of masculinity construction in the reproduction of boys' underachievement. She argues that explanations of boys' failure as a problem of curriculum and pedagogy have seen emphases in these areas repeatedly shifted in order that boys' interests and capacities might be more effectively engaged – a circumstance that has accommodated (rather than challenged) hegemonic 'boyiness'. Informed by these insights, Chapter 6 turned the analytic focus to the impact of masculinity construction in the interpretation, and *maintenance*, of boys' poor performance at school. This chapter investigated the constructions of 'what it is' to be a male (or female) learner that were at the heart of explanatory accounts of boys' failure. Acknowledging that representations of 'how boys are' formed the basis of accounts as to 'how boys should be helped', this chapter sought to interrogate dominant gender constructions with regard to their consequences for reform, and the subject positions they afforded male students.

Chapter 5 illustrated that pervasive characterizations of male and female learners were grounded in a set of relational contrasts. These contrasts worked to associate masculinity and femininity, respectively, with the binary poles of unequally valued learning behaviours (activity vs passivity, compliance vs resistance, meaningless learning vs meaningful learning, attention to detail vs real understanding and manipulation vs integrity). It was shown that the valorized pole of each of these dichotomies was invariably constructed as a *masculine* learning trait. It was argued that, through the binary logic of these explanatory accounts, the dimension of ‘authentic versus inauthentic learning’ was attributed a similarly gendered association, and corresponding valuation.

It was argued that the conflation of masculine traits and ‘genuine scholarship’ – a dominant pattern evident across the corpus – was a central feature of the contradictory discursive framework through which speakers made sense of male and female learners, and their achievement differentials. Indeed, it was argued that an essentialized alignment between masculinity and authentic learning enabled the capacity of boys to be naturalized *despite* their current failure, and that of girls *pathologized* despite their manifest success.

The depiction of boys’ underperformance, not simply as unproblematic but as evidence of superior ‘potential’, established a paradoxical relationship between gender and achievement. This relationship was shown to produce a series of dilemmas with regard to boys’ identity positioning, between the maintenance of a masculine identity (requiring the ‘activity’ and ‘independence’ characteristic of ‘genuine scholarship’) and successful engagement with school (where good results often require ‘feminine’ behaviours such as compliance and passivity).

Moreover, it was argued that speakers building accounts in which masculinity was simultaneously problematized (boys are underachieving) and valorized (boys are superior, authentic learners even when they fail) risked perpetuating the very problem they were aiming to solve. It was suggested that the depiction of boys' *underachievement* as proof of *superior* potential and *valued* masculinity offered no incentive for boys to change their educational engagement where to be a boy is to 'achieve without effort', and hard work is held to result in inauthentic (feminine) forms of 'success'.

Taken as a whole, the analyses and arguments developed in this thesis suggest that Cohen's historical investigation of male underachievement brings important insights to bear upon contemporary debates about boys' education. As Cohen explains, the apparent disjunction between appropriate, valued male ways of being and behaviours required for effective engagement at school has historically been protected from analysis. Instead, attention has been directed to the methods, teachers and texts deemed inadequate because they have failed to support the manifestation of boys' 'natural' capacity. In turn, curricular and pedagogic practices have continually been shifted and revised in order to facilitate boys' achievement – efforts that have worked to accommodate and reproduce existing gendered limitations with regard to academic engagement.

The analysis presented has argued that accounts of teachers and curriculum as 'to blame' for boys' underachievement absent the need for critical investigation of the intersection between masculinity and schooling. This thesis has aimed to highlight the problems associated with such an omission, arguing that the simultaneous

critique and valorization of masculine learning traits evident in accounts of boys' failure reinforced a central tension between 'boyiness' and successful engagement with school. Through the depiction of boys as 'authentic learners even when they fail', witnesses to the Inquiry established a contradictory relationship between gender and academic performance, in which boys' achievement was naturalized even in its absence, and that of girls pathologized despite their demonstrable success. Ultimately, it was suggested that failure to address and deconstruct this paradox has constrained, and will continue to limit, the options for educational engagement available to *all* school students. Moreover, it was argued male students' underachievement 'problem' may well be reproduced as long as boys' rejection of 'feminine' (expressive, conscientious) learning practices is not only valued as 'authentic', but depicted as 'appropriately male'.

6.2 Implications of the findings

6.2.1 Implications for policy

It has been argued that policy makers are not simply faced with a given concern, but instead must identify and formulate the issue they seek to address (Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993). This insight is particularly pertinent with regard to the findings of this thesis, which has investigated versions of 'the crisis in boys' education' in the context of an Inquiry seeking to define the nature of, and solution to, boys' underachievement 'problem'.

As was argued in Chapter 1, constructions of boys' failure are by no means neutral representations of an observable phenomenon. Instead, they have been shown to comprise selections as to *what counts* as disadvantage (where it might be measured,

and on what criteria), and as to *whose* relative advantage should be the focus of inquiry (in this case, boys' versus girls'). These selections have been argued to *produce* 'the issue of male underachievement' and to make relevant specific interventions by which this 'problem' might be addressed.

From a policy perspective, recognition of the productive nature of accounts of boys' 'failure' has significant implications. Given that the reported 'findings' of the Inquiry into Boys' Education have already begun to shape educational practice and resource allocation (see Martino *et al.*, 2004), it seems imperative to acknowledge the founding assumptions on which they were produced. In this sense, the Committee's recommended interventions aimed at raising boys' performance must be interrogated with regard to the influence of the Inquiry's initial terms of reference, which failed to make relevant the socio-political location of schooling. Inquiry proceedings were premised upon the notion that it is important (and valid) to foreground gendered achievement differentials at the expense of those associated with factors such as race and class, and to absent discussion of post-school options in the evaluation of educational disadvantage. As such, the homogenized 'failing boys' accounts informing the Inquiry's final report must be held accountable for turning the equity gaze away from intensifying socio-cultural inequalities – and for marshalling the disadvantage of poor/non-white boys as justification for serving the interests of all (even middle-class/high achieving) male students.

Significant policy implications may also be seen to flow from dominant representations of teachers and curriculum as 'to blame' for boys' underachievement.

As was discussed in Chapter 3, accounts establishing teacher responsibility for boys' failure risked reinforcing patterns of surveillance and accountability that have been argued to discipline (particularly female) educators, and to result in 'thin pedagogies' that position high outcome measures as the central goal of schooling. Such accounts have also informed professional development strategies compelling teachers to modify their methods to meet gendered needs – interventions that have been critiqued as stereotypical and essentialist (Sukhnandan, 2000). Where teacher responsibility for gendered achievement is formalized in policy, the freedom with which educators might challenge such constructions will increasingly be limited, as will the resultant options for effective engagement they may make available to boys.

Claims that male students' underperformance is the result of inadequate and biased curriculum may also be seen to give rise to important policy consequences. As was illustrated in Chapter 4, accounts of this kind served to advocate targeted boy-friendly curriculum reform to redress inequities held to have been caused by 'feminized' subject matter and methods of assessment. Such representations have significant policy implications, in that they were shown to depict reform efforts for female students as having been entirely successful, to the extent that boys have *replaced* girls as the educationally 'disadvantaged' gender. As was illustrated in Chapter 4, these accounts served to advocate a 're-masculinization' of curriculum to redress 'impediments to male success' argued to be evidenced by boys' declining rates of achievement.

As was explained in the introduction to this thesis, many of the grounds on which reform for girls has been advocated and implemented over the last thirty years *still*

exist – despite improvements in female students’ levels of recorded attainment. Complex gendered patterns of participation, retention and subject choice have meant that girls’ heightened achievement has failed to translate into superior (or even *equal*) post-school opportunities in education and employment (Kenway *et al.*, 1997). For this reason, it has been argued that, where gender equity considerations encompass the broader political location of schooling *as well as* within-school achievement differentials, it is simply not possible for (past and present) barriers to female achievement to be deemed ‘equivalent’ to those currently faced by boys (Skelton, 1994). On these grounds, it seems that boys’ underachievement *does not* represent a shift in terms of the gender that may be deemed to be disadvantaged as measured by an objective set of criteria. Rather, it appears that accounts of boys as ‘disadvantaged’ by curriculum and assessment *reframe* equity benchmarks, such that underperformance becomes synonymous with disadvantage in and of itself.

At a policy level, it seems that an acknowledgement of this reframing would have significant implications. As part of efforts to translate the findings of this Inquiry into protocols for practice, recognition of the initial driving principles of gender reform would reposition a consideration of the socio-political location of schooling at the heart of the equity agenda. Without this perspective, interventions aimed at addressing male underachievement seem likely to compound continuing gendered power differentials via an intensified focus on the interests of boys – justified as part of a (re-packaged, yet ostensibly ‘non-discriminatory’) gender equity framework.

Perhaps the most important policy implications arising from this thesis stem from the naturalized framework of ‘presumptive equality’ evident within *each* of the

repertoires identified across the transcripts. As was illustrated throughout the analytic chapters, dominant accounts of boys' failure invariably advocated a focus on the interests of male students as an issue of 'equity' – a framework that may be seen to signal the end of legitimate policy concern and resource allocation addressing the education of girls.

As Ailwood and Lingard (2001) have argued, shifts in national gender policy from *Girls, School and Society* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1975), *The National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987) and *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls* (Australian Education Council, 1993) to *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (Ministerial Council, 1997) may be seen to mark the “endgame for national girls' educational policies in Australia” (p.1). It seems clear that accounts of 'male disadvantage' within the Inquiry into Boys' Education reproduce and sediment this policy direction, enshrining the notion that boys and girls are now comparably empowered and comparably oppressed – such that male 'underperformance' (a divergence from this assumed equality) now represents a 'discrimination' that must be redressed.

A policy orientation to boys' poor performance as proof of 'male educational disadvantage' has serious consequences for female students. Most obviously, this perspective supports the allocation of resources and targeted practice away from the needs of girls, despite the continuing role of education in limiting women's options in social and economic life. Moreover, as was argued in Chapter 5, this framework positions the success of girls as the *unacknowledged catalyst* for educational

change. As Cohen has argued, the failure of policy to recognize this impetus means that historical patterns through which girls' achievements have been negated, and boys' failure re-packaged as 'success', will inevitably be reproduced.

As was illustrated in Chapter 5, a societal commitment to the achievement of boys was evident within accounts depicting male students as 'more authentic scholars even when they fail'. It seems likely that the translation of this perspective into policy recommendations will justify interventions aimed at facilitating boys' 'potential for genuine success' – interventions that, by advocating a focus on homogenized versions of male 'needs' and 'abilities', will normalize and reproduce these 'qualities'. Ultimately, it seems that policy dictates valorizing/accommodating 'masculine' learning traits risk *formally reproducing* the problem they aim to solve. The central argument of this thesis has been that efforts to accommodate hegemonic 'boyiness' fail to interrogate central tensions between appropriate schoolboy masculinity (comprising the rejection of 'feminine' effort and compliance) and successful engagement with school – tensions implicated in the reproduction of boys' underperformance. In turn, where policy recommendations formally absent issues of masculinity construction in addressing the 'failure' of male students, it seems that they will work to *maintain* (rather than ameliorate) the 'crisis' in boys' education.

6.2.2 Implications for practice

It has been argued that the issue of boys' underachievement represents an area of professional concern informed primarily by media accounts (Lingard, 2003) and populist texts (Mills, 2003), rather than research-based development programs. This

thesis has highlighted the impact of teachers' gender assumptions on educational provision, highlighting the need for critical and reflexive training in this area. It was not the intention of this thesis to criticize teachers; the analysis presented suggests that the opportunity to reflect critically upon normalizing gender constructions would support educators in facilitating the achievement of both male and female students.

Analysis in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis showed that educators' assumptions as to boys' 'needs' and 'capacities' impact significantly upon the ways in which pedagogies are modified to suit, and in turn *reinforce*, gendered learning orientations. Where teachers are 'obliged' to adapt their practice to match (essentialized constructions of) 'how boys are', it is clear that they will accommodate – and reproduce as natural – dominant masculine ways of being. It seems that this process, rather than expanding male students' options for achievement, will *limit* the ways in which boys might engage with school and maintain a 'normal', 'appropriate' masculine identity.

Within the Inquiry, teachers' *own constructions* of their practice as the 'critical factor' with regard to boys' attainment were entirely understandable; the depiction of educators' own methods as critically *beneficial* to male students worked to manage personal accountability where 'teacher-influence' was placed under scrutiny. At the same time, however, such a humanist focus on meeting boys' 'specific requirements' directed attention away from the critical interrogation of educational gender regimes. Indeed, accounts depicting professional teaching

practice as necessarily responsive to masculine 'needs' and 'capacities' worked, in many instances, to *legitimate and reinscribe* an intellectual gender hierarchy.

Chapter 5 illustrated that dominant constructions of gendered learners (to which educators explained they adapted their practice) were grounded in a set of relational contrasts. These binary representations served to depict boys and girls as homogenous groups, possessing entirely opposite learning orientations. At a surface level, it appeared that these constructions worked simply to reinforce existing stereotypes with regard to masculine 'activity' and 'resistance', and feminine 'passivity' and 'compliance'. Yet it was shown that dichotomous gender constructions served an additional function: reproducing an essentialized association between 'masculine learning traits' and those signifying 'authentic scholarship'.

Through binary gender constructions, educators depicted female students' success as the result of 'second-order skills' with which girls are 'naturally equipped, and boys' failure as proof of potential for *genuine* attainment where conditions are ideal. While it could be argued that such constructions represented an effort by teachers to value male learners and thereby encourage their future success, Chapter 5 suggested that this framework risked quite different implications.

Constructions of female students as inherently non-intellectual (through the association of femininity with 'inferior' learning styles and 'inauthentic' success) reproduced historical patterns through which girls have been excluded from the realm of valued scholarship. Chapter 5 argued that representations once used to explain female students' failure (girls are 'just neat'; they are 'just compliant')

functioned in this context to undermine girls' current *success*, maintaining their intellectual inferiority despite shifts in gendered attainment. Where such constructions inform educational practice, and influence evaluations of the results female students achieve, it seems that this pattern will be reproduced – constraining girls' capacity to understand themselves as 'legitimate knowers' and their successes as valuable accomplishments.

For boys, pedagogies orienting to male learning styles as synonymous with authentic scholarship appear to be similarly problematic. Where teachers accommodate dominant masculine learning behaviours on the grounds that they reflect genuine scholarship even in the absence of attainment, it seems likely that boys' underachievement will *always* be protected from meaningful scrutiny. As long as boys' achievement is depicted as the natural result of inherent capacity, it seems that their underperformance will continue to be 'explained away' – attention focused instead on adjusting educational conditions (methods, teachers, texts) in order to support the manifestation of their 'potential'. It appears clear that this process, a contemporary incarnation of historical patterns through which an intellectual gender hierarchy has been maintained, will not serve boys well. Rather, it seems that the valorization of hegemonic 'boyiness' will *reinforce* patterns of gendered connection with school, restricting the leverage of interventions aimed at raising boys' performance. As long as boys' underachievement is positioned as proof of *superior* potential and *valued* masculinity, there exists no incentive for male students to change their educational engagement. Where teachers accommodate the notion of boys' 'natural' capacity for 'superior' scholarship, it

seems boys will *continue* to face an identity dilemma between the successful performance of 'authentic' masculinity, and successful engagement with school.

By identifying the limits, and consequences, of dominant gender constructions, this thesis has aimed to draw attention to the space available to teachers in which they may draw flexibly on *alternative* representations of male and female learners. It is hoped that the analysis presented might support teachers in using their 'productive' power to challenge and expand the options for effective academic engagement made accessible to students of *both* genders.

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